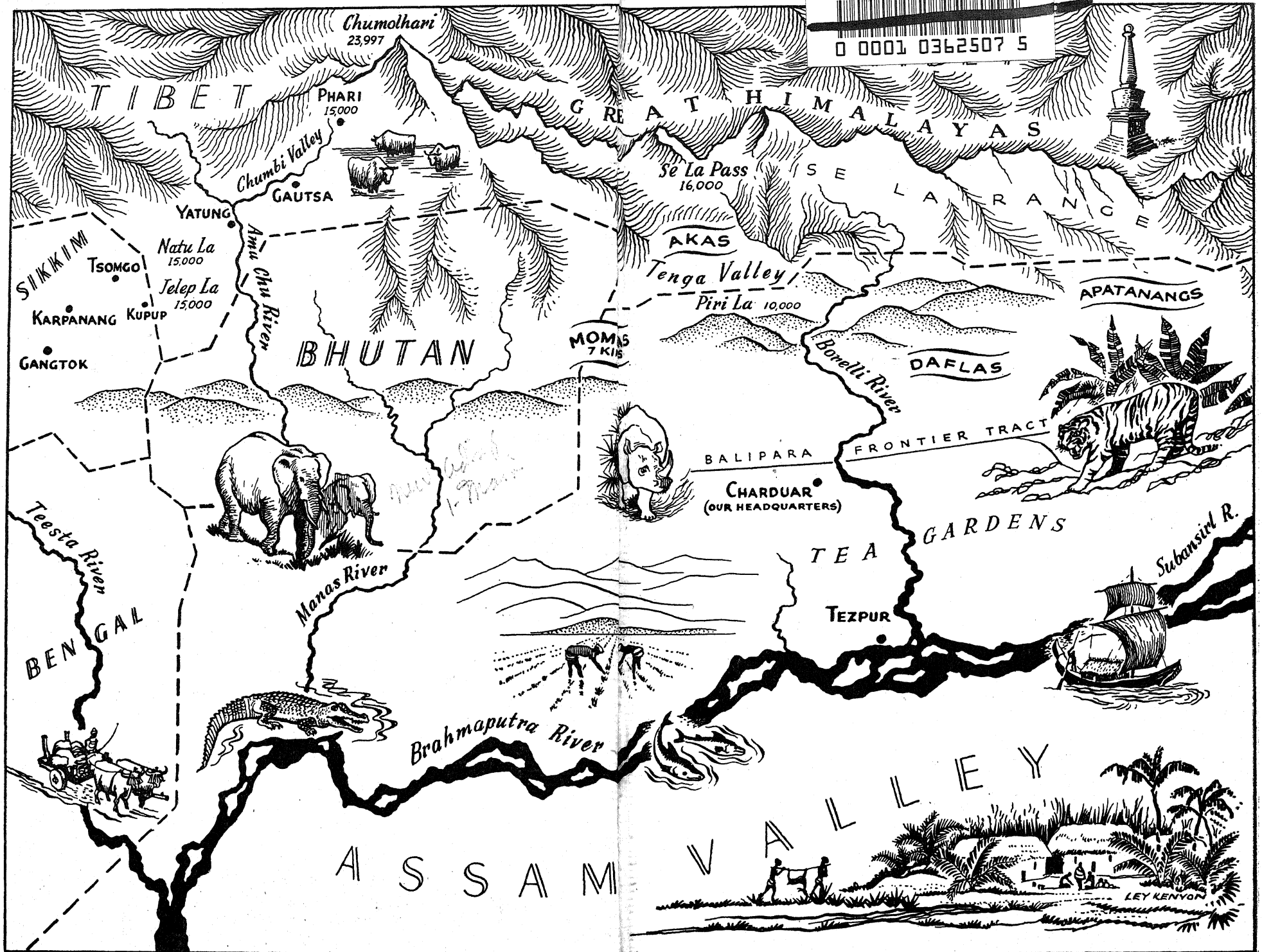






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Figure 1 is a schematic diagram of the experimental setup. It shows a subject sitting at a table, viewing a video screen. A camera is positioned above the screen. A light source is positioned to the left of the screen. A scale bar is shown below the screen. The diagram is labeled with 'Subject', 'Video Screen', 'Camera', 'Light Source', and 'Scale Bar'.

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Portrait of a Botanist

*Drawing by the Author*

# ADVENTURES *of a* BOTANIST'S WIFE

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*Eleanor Bor*

*With 35 photographs  
and 6 drawings by the Author*

*Publishers*



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To  
My Husband





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## *Forest Officer*

WHEN I married, in 1931, a member of the Indian Forest Service I brought with me as my dowry two table-cloths and a bull terrier. Apart from those possessions I was a portionless bride. As his own contribution, the bridegroom brought with him a large number of books, a torn pink cotton curtain and two spaniels. Also a trouser press used for pressing botanical specimens. And some camp equipment.

I got rid of the pink curtain at once. Some years later I jettisoned the trouser press. The camp equipment remained with us to the end of our travels. But one of the spaniels, poor little Biddy, left us very soon. A sudden heart attack took her away.

So we started life together with the camp furniture, my table-cloths, which we never used, one spaniel and a bull terrier—and the old cook and the bearer, Khatm Mia, both of whom remained more or less constant to the end.

In the beginning I had the vaguest notions as to what a forest officer's duties involved. I gathered that much of our life would be spent among the forests of Assam, where my husband had lived and worked for the previous ten years. I certainly had no premonition of the infinite variety that lay ahead of us. Variety of forest and of climate and of altitude. Above all, variety of peoples and of experiences to come.

When we first came home together friends often asked, rather irritably: "What exactly *is* a forest officer?"

I found it simplest to tell them: "He's a kind of factor or estate agent. Also a gamekeeper. You know the sort of thing"—most of them didn't—"only his 'estate' covers about five hundred square miles. Often much more."

Actually, a forest officer's duties involve a great deal more. He has to tour his forests extensively, determine which areas may be felled, which may be used for plantations, and to decide where villagers may be allowed to settle and where cultivation can be allowed. He has to travel for miles, marking trees for felling. He has to deal with contractors who 'work' the felled timber, and he has to know the villagers who are permitted to settle rent free in the forests—villagers who, in return, give their services building camps and helping in the forest work.

Above all, a forest officer has to know his staff, and his forests. And the animals of the game sanctuaries.

In India these duties involve a man in a multitude of experiences, particularly among the wild animals of the jungle.

At one time my husband was engaged in hunting elephants for the Government. His adventures at that time would make a book by themselves. Elephants, and most of the jungle creatures, are incidental to my story of the forests and the mountains. Incidental and sometimes accidental—as on the day when my husband, accompanied by his conservator, Mr. Milroy, met a bear while walking through their forests.

Bears are unpredictable in their behaviour. The two forest officers knew that, and they knew that a bear is likely to be more dangerous than any other animal in the jungle. So they knew what to do. They left the path and ran for their lives, Mr. Milroy dropping his umbrella in his haste.

The bear found the umbrella and dealt with it, then passed on quietly to wherever he was going. The two men crept out from under cover and found the umbrella torn into a mass of twisted spokes and shredded cotton. Something like the sort of mess their own faces might have been in, if the bear had dealt with them instead of with the umbrella.

Several times I have seen villagers, mostly hillmen, whose faces had been clawed by bears. Coddled Europeans could not have survived such lacerations. The disfigurement was frightful. But those hardy hillmen had astounding powers of recovery.

I remember one man walking into our local dispensary with his shoulder clawed open. There was no shoulder left—only a blood-dried cavity stuffed with dirty rags and tufts of grass. He had walked for two days like that before he reached the dispensary. The wound was septic and the pain must have been appalling. Yet the whole thing was healed, and the man on his way back to his hills, within a month.

But . . . 'Bears are scarce'. At least that was what we learnt from

the advertisement of an expensive hair lotion which claimed to be made from bears' grease. The alleged scarcity of bears accounted for the high price of the lotion. Anyway, scarce or not, bears have taken me some distance from the thread of my story.

Having tried to explain what my husband's duties involved, I have had to face other questions, usually asked still more irritably, such as:

"But, if he was a forest officer, what was he doing administering political areas?"

The answer to that one involved a deal of complicated explanation. I had to tell my friends that I had married a man who, besides being a forest officer, was first, last and always a botanist, news apt to bring derisive smiles to the lips of those who regarded botany as a suitable pastime for a Victorian young lady. They may be right. My own experience of botanists has taught me to look upon them as a species that seeks untrodden ways, often perilous, in their search for 'specimens'.

Seeking untrodden ways in Assam brings one always to the borders of mountain countries inhabited by innumerable tribes, each tribe with a language of its own.

The botanist I had married had yet another hobby, and that was languages. Wherever his duties took him he set himself to learn the local language. Somehow it always happened that as soon as he had mastered a language he was moved to another district. When I first knew him he could speak seven different languages of the country.

It was this language habit that gave him the rare chance of an occasional job as political officer among some of the most interesting parts of Assam.

To make everything as clear as I can I had better explain that in those days certain hill districts in Assam were administered by men chosen for their special qualifications, particularly if their qualifications included a knowledge of the local language—or the ability to learn it. Usually the men appointed belonged to the I.C.S. Often they were policemen. Rarely were they forest officers. Forest officers mostly had enough to do without wasting their time on botany and languages.

My experience of life as the wife of a forest officer was limited to little more than three months. After that time my husband became a 'forest officer, etc'. And then, as time went on, he ceased to be a forest officer at all.

But those first three months together, a kind of busman's honeymoon, were an eye-opening joy to me.

To begin with, our household consisted, as I have said, of our two selves, the old cook and Khatm Mia, the bearer. And our dogs. The cook and Khatm Mia and two of the dogs remained as constant factors for the greater part of our life in India.

Both servants had already been with my husband for two years before I joined the household. They were more than first-rate servants. We reckoned them among our friends, despite the knowledge that my arrival had reduced the housekeeping expenses by half.

I took over my duties very gradually. Apart from my anxiety not to upset the domestic staff, I could not in those days speak their language well, so was forced to abstain from too much interference. Besides, who could have resisted Khatm Mia's wedding gift to me—a small brass stand adorned with gilt safety-pins? And who could resist the old cook's wily smile or his soft, imperturbable voice uttering the naïvest of lies?

In the forest, too, we had our friends—forest guards and rangers, old men in the villages. And everywhere the animals whose tracks we followed through the jungle. Of the forest friends I remember chiefly Bakharu, a deputy ranger who seemed to be always with us in our early days of travel. Bakharu was a Kachari—that is, he belonged to a branch of one of the hill tribes that had settled on the plains.

We have seldom known a man keener on his job. He was tireless, dauntless—sticking at nothing to ensure a successful end to his work. Because he was Bakharu he was not obliged to wear the regulation uniform of his service. His normal dress was a *dhoti*, the flowing cotton garment of the plains. For convenience in moving through the forest (and there was no part of the forest where he didn't move) Bakharu tucked his *dhoti* up into the briefest form of loin-cloth. He wore a pill-box hat, the correct wear for deputy rangers in those days. Also he carried a gun, or, rather, an automatic pistol slung from his shoulder in the style of a lady's handbag.

He was allowed to carry this firearm because of the dangers involved in his work of rounding up poachers in the forests, particularly rhino poachers.

In those days poachers had almost exterminated the rhinoceros of Assam. Apart from its rarity (rhinoceros do not breed freely or frequently) this animal was of great value due to the alleged 'medicinal' property of its horn, powdered rhino horn being considered invaluable as an aphrodisiac—a stimulant much in demand throughout the land.



Fantastic prices would be offered for a rhino's horn, and fantastic were the transactions between poachers and buyers when horns were sold.

The successful poacher would arrange to meet his client at night somewhere in the tall grass jungle. Usually they agreed upon a place where the jungle track divided leaving an island of grass, seven feet high, between two narrow tracks. Secrecy was essential so that neither poacher nor client could implicate each other.

Through the tall screen of grass the horn would be passed by hand to be taken by another hand and carefully felt all over to ensure against deception. In the darkness of the forest night it was impossible to see the goods exchanged. But to an experienced hand the feel of a rhino's horn was unmistakable. Shaped almost like a cone, it was smooth at the top, roughened in a peculiar manner at the base.

The unseen hand, having tested and approved the horn, would then push a bag of money through the grass screen to the poacher's hand that waited for the prize. As much as one thousand rupees might be paid for one horn at a time.

Then the dealers would silently make their separate ways back through the forest to their homes.

Between them Bakharu and my husband managed to stamp out rhino poaching in their forests. Moreover, the Government made it a punishable offence for anyone to be found in possession of a rhino horn. So the poachers were obliged to manufacture a substitute. They began to make imitation horns by cutting off the tip of a buffalo's horn and gluing it into a bamboo root. To the *touch* this felt like the genuine article. And since the deal took place in darkness, and always through a screen of grass, the new deal proved successful. For the poacher.

Bakharu was justly proud of his successes when hunting down poachers. Although I could not understand his language, a dialect my husband was learning in those days, I loved to have him walking with us through the forests, delighting in the triumphant tones that told me he was telling tales of his successes.

Most of that time we were in camp, living in tents or grass huts, moving our headquarters every other day or so—riding upon elephants or marching before dawn along the jungle tracks.

Although I had already lived in Assam for two years I had never seen a wild animal, except a baby bear. Yet within a week of our wedding day I had seen four tigers, two of which my husband shot. He never shot another. We confessed ourselves too fond

of the lovely creatures ever again to watch them die in all their strength and beauty.

But at that time of the year, February and March, we had the best chance of seeing every beast of the forest, for it is during the hot, dry winds of March that the forest fires rage among the grasslands of the jungle—the fires that drive the animals out into the open.

The forest fires of Bengal and Assam are not as disastrous as the fires of northern forests. They are nearly always caused by villagers who kindle fires so as to destroy the coarse grass and the undergrowth, leaving the ground clear for the growth of new grass shoots to feed the village cattle.

Sometimes, rarely, fires are caused by lightning. But, unless plantations are destroyed, the fires do little damage—except to tortoises which, poor things, move too slowly to escape as fast as the other animals. Wherever possible timber plantations as well as forest villages are protected by a fire-line. Even so, a forest fire can get out of hand and become dangerous.

We were camped on the banks of the Manas, one of Assam's enormous rivers, when I first experienced the excitement of these fires. I had already tasted other excitements near that camp. For one thing it was also my first experience of life in a grass hut and I was enchanted by the hut. Although the weather was becoming uncomfortably hot it always seemed cool and restful inside our hut on the banks of the river. The sunlight filtering through walls of sweet-scented grass gave an effect of cool, green twilight in a place where trees were few, and where the hot sun outside had parched the green from everything.

Rather too vividly I remember our first evening at that camp. After a long and dusty journey I thankfully saw our canvas bath being filled with hot water in the bathroom that opened out of the bedroom. The doors connecting the rooms were not slung on hinges. They consisted of slabs of grass bound together, slabs which you placed in position against the doorways.

I was revelling in my bath when a peculiar swishing sound made me look up in time to see the door leading to the bedroom slowly leaning towards me—slowly and inexorably collapsing into the bath. With one hand I tried to push it back into position, but it was heavy. Anyway, it was time to get dressed. So I stood up and gave the door a shove. And at that moment the outer bathroom door crashed inwards on top of me.

I had heard of people being 'flooded' but I had never before heard of anyone being 'doored'. Neither 'flooded' nor 'doored'

nor any other word could describe my feelings. It was impossible to call for help. Had I done so my yells would have brought all the servants rushing to my assistance. And I was not in a position to receive them.

For a moment I stood there, bowed under the weight of both doors, feeling rather like Samson and the Gates of Gaza. Then I groped and found the bath towel. Swathing it round me I allowed the inner door to sink splashily into the bath water while I shook myself free of the outer door and took a running leap into my camp bed before shouting to my husband to come and rescue me.

The next evening I again got into trouble. I was wandering about among the shoals and shallows of the river when I found myself plunging and struggling among the sucking horror of a quicksand. I was soon rescued. But there was a stretch of shallow water between us and the bank. My husband bade me ride him pick-a-back so that I should not get wet. The water, however, was deeper than we had guessed. Almost at once my rescuer was up to his waist in water, and I was sitting on top of the river, skimming the surface neatly, ending the journey soaked to the skin.

The next day we moved farther up the river, camping in tents not far from where the hills of Bhutan rose deeply blue above the forests. We were making for a locality known as Randani Bandani, which sounded so like the chorus to a folk song that we could never resist adding a resounding "Ho!" after the name.

Moving to 'Randani Bandani-Ho!' we had with us three of the Forest Department elephants to carry our tents and luggage.

They moved ahead of us, their huge grey bodies brushing aside the tall parched grass that grew everywhere, stretching away to the heavier jungle at the foot of the hills.

Trees grow sparsely in those stretches of 'Savannah Jungle'. Miles of grassland are broken here and there by gaunt-looking trees, among which perhaps the simul cotton is the most conspicuous. Bare of leaves, the branches stick out straight like the rungs of a ladder, each branch usually occupied by at least one vulture. Generally more.

The huge birds sit immobile as if carved in stone, until a clumsy flapping of wings carries them off to some other perch in the jungle.

During the last war a party of American soldiers (who had never seen vultures before) halted their truck under a simul tree adorned with the usual garnish of vultures. The G.I.s thought

that the red-wattled birds were turkeys. They unloaded a tommy-gun and let fly, blasting the tree to pieces and bringing down about a dozen evil-smelling vultures. I would like to know at what stage of cooking or eating they discovered their mistake. Like many true stories, the sequel is not on record.

Repulsive as they are, I find vultures fascinating. During the monsoon we have watched a crowd of them standing in a rice field drying their wings. The drill was so regular you would have thought that somebody must have given words of command—"Wings open!" And—after an interval—"Wings close!" They just stood there, hordes of them, doing nothing awhile. And then each bird opened its huge, untidy wings, paused with them spread, flapped them slowly—then dropped them again before repeating the performance.

Sitting up over a tiger kill one sees vultures at their best (or worst), disgustingly *in* their element. In the long hours of waiting for a tiger to come we were always grateful to the vultures for providing a macabre comic relief to the drama of the dying day.

All round the kill every tree and every branch would be occupied by vultures sitting in rows and tiers—the audience above the arena.

One after another they would glide down to tear gobbets out of the carcass. The boldest birds would thrust their long, scrawny necks right inside the corpse, their heads and necks disappearing as if decapitated. Only the noise of gobbling, tearing and squabbling proclaimed the voracious life going on in those truncated bodies. Satiated at last, the heads would be pulled out and the birds, too heavily gorged to fly, would move off in a series of ponderous hops—hurrying only if they heard the leaves crackle under the footfalls of an approaching tiger.

Long grass and simul trees, and on every tree a vulture. For eight miles or so we followed the elephants till we came to Randani Bandani-Ho! No grass huts here. Only our tent and the servants' tents pitched on the rim of the river bank.

And before we were within a mile of the camp we could see in the distance the smoke of forest fires. The fires were raging several miles away but already the air was filled with the ash of burned grass, ash and charred flakes of grass that fell upon us as we walked. And everywhere the smell of burning grass.

When evening came we could plainly see the flames from the distant fires. Flames that rose sometimes high above the scattered trees, flames that seemed to advance and then die down again before flaring upwards in a new direction. Often we heard sharp

reports like guns going off—the burst of noise that tells when a clump of bamboo explodes in the heat of fire.

All round our tents the ground had been already ‘fired’ as a protection against the possible encroachment of other fires. But the tents were pitched in such a tiny clearing that I looked with some alarm that night at the distant flames leaping against the darkness. I was new to this jungle life, and, dearly as I loved it, it seemed to me to be fraught with dangerous possibilities. Nor, as it happened, were my fears unjustified.

I suppose we had been in bed for an hour or so when I woke up to find the tent weirdly illuminated. As always, when in camp, we slept with the tent wide open to the night, and I saw the trees outside the tent, the camp table and our chairs dancing in the lurid glare of fiery light. I got up and went outside.

Terrifyingly close I saw a wall of flame rapidly approaching. I could hear the roar and crackle of the fire. The bursting of bamboos sounded like gun-fire. Thanking Heaven that we were close to the river, I hurried back and woke my husband and our dogs.

In a few seconds the whole camp was awake. The fire was dangerously near. Not, my husband assured me, that the camp was in real danger. The flames would retreat when they reached the fire-line where there was nothing for them to consume. But, apart from the possibility of falling sparks, the danger was that our elephants might take fright and bolt. Their front legs were shackled to prevent their wandering too far from the camp, but they were untethered, free to move about browsing through the night—as is the way of elephants, who are nocturnal feeders. The smell of fire would be enough to frighten them into panic. Already we could hear their restless movements, their squealing and their trumpeting. If they bolted (shackled though they were they could shuffle speedily under the spur of fright) Heaven alone knew when we might find them again.

Moreover, it was possible that they might charge the camp, trampling everything, ourselves included, to pieces in their panic.

The mahouts were sent at once to unshackle the elephants and to guide them across the river well away from the approaching fire. Everyone else, Bakharu of course among them, began clearing the ground beyond the tiny camp site. The cook and Khatm Mia were warned to watch for falling sparks, and to be ready to pack up, even to throw everything into the river—if necessary. The old cook was unperturbed as usual. Everything, he assured us, would be all right. Even now the flames were less

menacing. Their terrifying roar diminished as they flickered and waned, died down and rose again, finally retreating before the burned and barren ground round the camp.

Once again the night took charge, and the only sound in our ears was the murmur of the river flowing near the camp.

I thought of the elephants in the forest just beyond the river, thankfully picturing them safely out of the smell of fire.

My husband had told me that a shackled elephant could cover an incredible distance. He told me that night of an old elephant caught in the stockade in his elephant hunting days. When the hunters had come to inspect the herd of huge wild beasts they found one elephant that had evidently been caught and escaped many years before. It was still wearing one of the shackling chains round its foot. When first captured it must have broken the connecting chain and escaped. In the course of years the animal had grown up and the bracelet-like chain had become so deeply embedded in the flesh that the thick hide had grown over the constricting chain. When captured for the second time the elephant's foot had become a vast swollen mass of flesh with two or three discharging holes betraying the existence of a suppurating wound. It is unbearable to think what that animal must have suffered through the years. Thick-skinned though they are, elephants can suffer abominably. They even get toothache in their tusks.

When the wound was probed and the shackle chain discovered my husband got the vet to pump in cocaine by the pint all round the misshapen foot. Link by link he and the vet cut out the rusty chain, releasing pints of pus from the appalling gash.

The relief to the animal was apparent at once. Within a week or two the wound was healed and the old elephant was set free again to roam the forests where for unnumbered years she had lived in constant pain. For all we know, that elephant is still somewhere among the forests of Assam.

In the days before the forest roads and the hill paths were made available to motor traffic a civil servant (perhaps a forest officer or some other kind of officer on tour) was bound to travel on foot or on pony. Or elephant. He might not cover more than nine or ten miles a day. At most he would do twenty miles, but he got to know his district and his 'people' far more intimately than was possible in later years when he was able to rush round the district in a car.

Doubtless speedier travel left him far more time for office work. But the essential nature of his work was changed. It was

no longer possible to be in really close touch with your district. No longer possible to move leisurely along with friends like Bakharu. No longer possible to welcome the greetings of villagers whom you knew so well. Villagers who refreshed you with draughts of coco-nut milk while you rested by the roadside exchanging news and gossip, listening to complaints, offering advice and settling disputes.

I am thankful that my brief experience of a forest officer's life showed me something of the life as it used to be. It is true that we had a car in those days, and some of the forest roads were open to car traffic. But mostly we travelled on foot.

On foot or on elephant, I don't know which I liked better. It depended on the type of forest.

In open grass country marching can be monotonous. Unless you are a botanist (which I am not) there is often nothing to be seen but walls of grass and the path beneath your feet. I found the path more interesting as, sooner or later, one was certain to find the tracks of tiger, deer, wild elephant and, occasionally, rhino. I think that, on the whole, it is better fun to ride an elephant through the grasslands. Perched up high on the back of the huge animal you can see for miles. And even though you might be carried along for miles without seeing anything but vultures there was always the chance that *something* more exciting might happen.

But *not* the sort of excitement that overtook us one day when we were travelling through the forests.

From open grassland we had just passed under some trees. We were both on the same elephant when my husband began to scratch the back of his neck; at first he scratched in an ordinary, absent-minded manner—anything in the jungle may start one scratching. Then he scratched more vigorously—irritably, ferociously. Within seconds he appeared to be going rapidly insane.

He was wearing shorts and an open-necked shirt. And he was scratching and tearing at every part of his body. I was horrified. We had been married only for six weeks and now it seemed that some latent lunacy was developing. Or had he been stung by a hornet? Or (ghastly thought) bitten by a snake?

Afraid to speak lest I aggravate the trouble, I heard him mutter: "My God, this is unbearable!" Then he flung himself off the elephant and rushed into the forest.

Left alone with the mahout I listened while the elephant halted, flapping its ears and chewing succulent stems of tara which it had picked up on the way. Not far off I heard the sounds of splashing in some nearby stream, and after a few minutes my

husband returned—his dripping garments showing that he had been bathing in the river.

Forest officers have a habit of yodelling when they greet one another. And now the noise of yodelling echoed through the forest—adding to my not yet accustomed ears a further proof of violent insanity. I was becoming nearly insane myself—with apprehension. I almost backed away when he hoisted himself up on to the elephant. Hoping not to provoke another outburst I forced my voice to sound calm as I inquired:

“I hope everything’s all right?”

“All right now. Thank Heaven the river was near. Yes,” he added thoughtfully, “it was that damned bean pod.”

He told me then that the elephant had brushed against a climbing bean, the pods of which were covered with microscopic loose hairs which, when the tree was shaken, had rained down upon him, causing intolerable itching. If he had not got into the river I have no idea how he would have got rid of the hairs. The violent irritation might well have driven him mad before we got back to camp. As it was, his sanity was preserved.

I had no further doubts when he insisted on collecting a specimen of the offending bean, identifying it as *Mucuna Prurita*.

One way and another I survived a number of shocks in those days.

Not long after the scratching incident my husband had business with a contractor whom he had arranged to meet near a forest village. The contractor was exceedingly anxious to secure the goodwill of the Forest Department, and I was warned that he would undoubtedly bring gifts for me; gifts which must in no circumstances be accepted, since the acceptance of anything more valuable than a few oranges or bananas was forbidden by Government.

We were moving down one of the lovely aisles of trees in the Sal Forests when far ahead of us we saw the gifts approaching.

The contractor, whose Assamese name meant Big Round Moon, came first. Behind him came his interpreter. And then a villager bearing on his head a vast tray laden with gifts. When we got to the procession the Big Round Moon displayed the gifts. They included: a bottle of whisky; two bottles of gin; a bottle of raspberry vinegar; a bottle of scent; a large tin of biscuits; several tins of fruit; tins of butter and tins of jam—and a pile of oranges, nuts and bananas.

Thanking him extravagantly I extolled his kindness, but firmly refused to accept anything but the fruit.



The Big Round Moon expressed concern. He spoke no English, and I knew no Assamese, so our conversation was conducted with the help of the interpreter who picked up the bottle of whisky and implored me to accept. My husband intervened, trying to stem the torrent of persuasion. In a gesture of despair the interpreter spread out his hands and pointing with the whisky bottle towards the Big Round Moon he exclaimed:

"But, sir! Madam *must* accept. This gentleman says she is his mother!"

It was no use. I really felt distressed for the Big Round Moon. But even the honour of being hailed as his mother could not allow us to break the strictest code of a Government servant.

Another shock greeted us when we arrived at one of the more primitive of the forest rest-houses. It was our first visit to that area, and the Assamese forest ranger was anxious to do everything to honour his forest officer's bride.

The ranger was standing by the roadside to meet us, waiting to accompany us as far as the shabby little rest-house.

"I gave orders," he told us, "that all should be ready for madam's arrival. There was only one chair. I have procured more. Also a mirror. Also," he added, "as there was no commode I have brought one for madam."

Looking back across the years, long years of intimate experience of the sanitary arrangements of rest-houses and dhak bungalows, I still feel warmly grateful to the ranger who brought the commode for madam.

Looking back again to those few months at the beginning of our life together, I seem to have remembered mostly a series of alarms and shocks and near disaster set against a background of simul trees and vultures; and forest fires rising above the grasslands of the jungle. That was my initiation—the incidents of travel as a forest officer's wife. Incidents and accidents set amidst the foreground of the jungle, and against the backcloth of the forests rising to the hills.

In India, when you talk of 'the hills' you usually refer to the highest mountains in the world—the Himalayas.

Never in all our travels were we out of sight of that great mountain range.

Most of our life was spent on the fringes of the foothills. Always our eyes were drawn upwards to the rare glimpse of some far peak shining above the forest.

I have known people who are bored by mountains—even

frightened by them, feeling as though the great towering masses might fall upon them.

I confess myself to be one of those (sometimes tiresome) people who not only adore mountains but who also insist on getting in amongst them. I want to know about them all that can be known—yet I do not possess the mountaineer's urge, or courage, to go in for alpine climbing; I have no head or heart for that sort of thing.

In our early days of jungle travel we both looked yearningly at the distant mountains, knowing that for us they held the possibility of infinite discovery; unexplored fields for a botanist's ambition; peoples, races and languages of which we saw and heard tantalizing specimens among our forest friends; endless subjects for my pen and pencil; unrivalled beauty in those hidden gorges where Assam's rivers flow from the highlands of Tibet.

I was fascinated, too, by the story of the Himalayas—the mountains that rose from the depths of the sea, from the ocean bed of Tethys. I was enthralled by the fantasy of the idea, and this fascination coloured every aspect of the Himalayas for me when (miraculously, it seemed) we left the forests for the hills.

At the end of those three months as forest officer and wife we went home on leave.

We returned to Assam to find my husband appointed to the dual job of forest officer in the Tezpur district and political officer in the Balipara Frontier Tract.

In other words, while he still had to look after the forests of a much smaller district his main work was to administer the tribal areas of the Himalayan foothills twenty miles northwards of the town of Tezpur.

## *People of the Hills*

I DID not even know where Tezpur was; I had never heard of the Balipara Frontier Tract. On the map I saw it marked as a district north of the Brahmaputra, much farther to the east than the Kamrup district where I had been initiated into the hazards of life as a forest officer's wife.

I doubt if either of us had any conception of the life that lay ahead of us when we drove away from Tezpur town along the dusty road towards our new home—our home beneath the hills.

I remember how the dust lay thick on the unmetalled road. Dust that rose and billowed in clouds behind us, while ahead the road was clear, so that we could see the dark line of forest with the foothills rising behind like waves above a desolate shore.

The wide expanse of rice fields, parched at that time of the year, might have been a sandy beach, the jungle lying like matted seaweed below the forested hills that rose in waves of green; wave beyond wave capped with white crests of foam that were often clouds—but which sometimes revealed themselves as the snow range, the lovely white crests of the Assam Himalayas.

The Se-La range with its three great peaks rises there above the long line of snows that stretch away to the east; still farther to the west an insignificant knob, scarcely discernible in the distance, shows Chumolhari's cone rising above the hidden plateau of Tibet.

Facing a new sort of life together we could not guess how, in the story of those hills and of the people that lived amongst them, our own lives were to play their part. Nearer the truth, perhaps, to say that, while we lived there, those people and their countries were to *be* our life.

Not only the people of the hills, but those who lived below the hills, the villagers working in their fields or in the forests (such as we had known before), the clerks working in the office, the porters who moved our camps from stage to stage. And, of course, the wild beasts of the forest, the insects—and our dogs.

All these, and the cook and Khatm Mia, had their places in a life that was shared by us all. We shared the fatigues and dangers of our journeys; we shared distress and illness, comedy and tragedy. When we journeyed together we rested by the roadside and shared the excitement of visiting new countries—in fact, we lived as others have done, with the people and for the people whom it was our luck and our great interest to know.

We did little that was spectacular and unusual, yet—"Such a thing was never known before!" exclaimed those earnest critics who, some years later, expressed amazed delight at the sight of Britishers sitting down among the Indian crowds "without fuss or condescension".

Never known before? More likely never *noticed* before. "Such a thing" was so ordinary, so entirely unremarkable that it never occurred to us or to anyone else that we were doing anything unusual. Or commendable.

There was nothing unusual either in the fact that many of us, when not in camp, lived in bungalows whose condition differed little, except in size, from that of the mud huts of the villagers.

In our new home at the edge of the forest we had few luxuries at any time. There was nothing in the way of ice or air-conditioning to alleviate the heat; no electricity either until we installed a small plant of our own, which supplied power enough for two electric lamps and two table fans. As for modern conveniences, we had no sanitation and no water laid on, our water supply being drawn in buckets from a well. We had leaking roofs, walls that were paper-thin, composed of cane and plaster through which you could push your finger into the next room if you wanted to. Nearly all buildings in Assam were like that, constructed so that they were proof against the earthquakes which, in that province, are often weekly—sometimes daily—occurrences. We had rats and mice, spiders, cockroaches and lizards, these conditions being accepted as the usual state of things in Government houses, except in large modern towns such as existed nowhere in Assam. Telephones and cinemas were unknown in our district, and our nearest doctor lived ten miles away.

About four miles distant from our house there was a railway. The car went bumping across the railway lines on that first

journey out to our new district. There was no level-crossing; the railway just passed across the road and you relied on your own eyes and ears to warn you of approaching trains. Actually there was only one train and it seldom achieved a speed higher than fifteen miles an hour, and only that when within sight of a station. Its track was sixteen miles long. There was a story told that a young planter once took on a bet that he would run three times round the train while it was in motion. He won the bet—which was understandable after you had once travelled in that train. We did so only once and we were probably lucky to complete the sixteen-mile journey in four hours; it had been known to take far longer—due to the whimsies of young men who used to amuse themselves by unhitching the engine while it stood panting at a station. The engine-driver needed a rest and refreshment at every station and could not be expected to be looking out for young men likely to uncouple his wagons. After the passengers had watched him remount his engine they would fling themselves back with a sigh upon the wooden seats, prepared for the jerk that preceded the gathering of speed. Instead of which they found themselves still in the station while the engine, free of its load of wagons, rushed madly along the track.

In the old days of jungle travel we knew a forest railway that was even more informal. It was known as 'the tram-line' and it followed one of the tracks that wandered into the jungle beneath the hills. Riding on the tram-line you sat in an open two-seated car with a frilled canopy overhead, looking rather like one of the earliest motor cars. Sometimes your car was coupled to trucks carrying logs dragged behind a ridiculous engine whose tall funnel made you want to boil a kettle on top. More often the first-class carriage was hooked to a vehicle which was propelled by hand, worked by two men who looked as though they were rowing the thing. Once, when the engine was ready to be attached, the signal was given too soon so that the engine started off without the train and without the driver. Gloriously free, it raced along the permanent way at a speed unknown in all its history. We saw it disappear down the long straight forest 'ride', we heard the despairing voice of the forest officer screaming: "Come back! Come back!"—and then the engine reached a curve, dashed across it and fell upon its side under the silence of the forest trees.

But the tram-line was three days' journey away from the forests towards which we were driving along that dusty road—the forests and the hills which we came to know so well during the three years while we lived and journeyed among the hills

below the snows. When the snows were visible we could see them clearly from our house, and it was the vision of that great barrier that first inspired our longing to get beyond it and into Tibet. The Se-La range formed the boundary between my husband's new 'district' and Tibet. Between our home and the Tibetan frontiers lay the unknown countries of the foothills, countries occupied by eight different tribes, people representing the gradual development of man from the primitive ways of jungle tribes up to the culture of the Middle Ages that prevails throughout Tibet.

Not many people outside Assam have ever heard the names of these hill countries, and even those who know the names know little of the people. Mishmis, Abors, Miris, Apatanangs, Daflas, Akas, Sherdukpen, Sherchokpa and Mombas—such names have less meaning than the list of friends of Old Uncle Tom Cobley and All. In the Frontier Tract we came across most of them at one time or another, and we came to know some of them well. East of the Dafla country our travels did not take us far, so that all that I would dare to tell of the remoter tribes can be put into a few words.

The Mishmis, farthest from us to the east, had achieved fame by having murdered a French missionary on his way to the Tibetan frontier in 1854.

The Abhors used to be reckoned the "savagest of these savage tribes". I believe they are still inclined to be troublesome. They murdered a political officer in 1911.

The Miris are famous for not having murdered anyone. Those who live on the plains are excellent boatmen. Their name may be derived from the Tibetan word for 'mankind', but it is said to have come from an Assamese word meaning a 'go-between'.

The only journey we were able to make into the Apatanang country gave us little chance to know or study the people. There was, however, a peculiarity of this isolated tribe that set us wondering; this was the disfigured appearance of the women, whose nostrils seemed to turn upwards under a flattened nose. Looking closer, we saw that the wings of their noses were pierced with small plugs of wood, adornments which they are taught to wear in childhood, the size of the plugs being increased as the features grow larger, until eventually the wings of the noses become flattened to the faces, the nostrils so distorted that they seem to be inverted.

There was nothing unusual in the distorted ears of the Apatanang men who force pieces of wood or bamboo rings into the pierced lobes of their ears. Ear-piercing is a custom common

to all the hill tribes. But the effect of grossly distended ear-lobes coupled with the upturned nostrils of the women called to mind travellers' tales of long ago, of days when the earliest explorers told of 'a cannibal tribe of the Himalayas', with upturned noses and abnormally long ears, a tribe who 'were naked and had tails'. The Apatanang men were naked except for a very small apron—and a tail made of plaited cane. Finally, when we heard it said that these people are reported to have been cannibals in former days, we could not help wondering about them; they appeared to answer so accurately to those almost legendary tales of Himalayan savages.

The Daflas, Akas, Sherdukpens and the rest came to know us well, for it was among their countries that we travelled most. All the hill people are of Mongolian origin, their varied languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group. At the time when we lived in the district not one of their languages had been studied or written; alphabets were unknown among the tribes. My husband was the first to learn the Dafla language and to write a grammar and a dictionary. Like all those hill languages it was monosyllabic, but not musically tonal like some of the Naga languages spoken among the hills between Assam and Burma. The Dafla language sounded like the cluckings of a barn-door fowl afflicted with catarrh. To quote a sentence uttered by our friend Karu when he first saw my bull terrier, Liz:

*"Na ikié nyèmè märe?"*

The words mean, "Is your dog a bitch?" and Karu sounded rather emphatic, for he had a real whisky voice induced by his fondness for rice-beer, a drink that is almost the staple diet of most of the hill tribes.

Karu had two professions; he was the village sorcerer as well as a Government-appointed interpreter. Soon after we came to live in his neighbourhood he took on a third job—that of language instructor to my husband. Every evening he came and sat on our veranda for an hour or so, his husky voice croaking out guttural sounds which were written down and learned until the pupil's voice was able to answer back and argue in the same language. By that time I had become used to my husband's addiction to learning local languages and I was content to read or write or draw to the accompaniment of weird noises that blended with the croaking of frogs, the shrilling of cicadas and the whine of mosquitoes. But my first experience of these language lessons was more startling.

That was when we were first married and my husband was

learning Mech, a weird language which he defines as—"monosyllabic, agglutinative, with connections with Burmese and Tibetan". At that time his instructor was an earnest convert from a Lutheran mission, a man named Lambar who, while we were in camp, used to come each evening and sit on the end of one of the enormous logs sticking out from the camp fire. He was always decently dressed in white shirt and shorts. His very dark skin (his was a negrito type) shone in the firelight while he strove to teach his pupil the errors of this wicked world. At the end of each lesson we used to ask him to sing a hymn, which he did with such unselfconscious zeal that I was never able to hide my astonished admiration. I wish I had the skill to draw a convincing picture of Lambar sitting on the log, the firelight flickering over him while the forest hung black and still all round—and Lambar's voice roaring Lutheran hymns (in his own monosyllabic, agglutinative language), his voice drowning the myriad voices of the insect world.

Lambar was a non-smoker and a teetotaller in those days. Some years later we chanced to meet him on a forest track coming from the market. For better or for worse he was greatly changed. His face was shining like oil and he was singing loudly; he was, in fact, bawling—songs, not hymns, as he lurched along the path. He had discarded his clean white shirt and shorts and was dressed simply and comfortably in a loin-cloth, a gigantic crucifix hanging by a string round his neck. He was no longer a Lutheran; he had 'gone over to Rome'.

Religious controversy made no appeal to Karu, the Dafla sorcerer. Like all his tribe, like most of the hill tribes of Assam, he was an animist, and up to date no missionaries have been able to undermine the animism of the hill-people in those countries south of Tibet.

Karu dressed like the rest of his countrymen, wearing a large number of necklaces made from yellow beads (we could never discover the origin of those yellow beads, by which the Daflas set great store, but I have several of the necklaces laid away in a box) and, as a concession to modesty, a string round his middle from which dangled a hand-woven apron not much larger than a fig leaf. For protection against cold and wet he wore a dingy cotton blanket. His hair was arranged in the style affected by all Dafla men—that is, it was allowed to grow long and was plaited, the plait being screwed into a thick knob secured by a long brass pin above his forehead. Daflas say this fashion is adopted as a protection against mortal blows from an enemy's axe. Few Dafla



men are complete without their hat—a smart little confection made of plaited cane, rather like a ‘Dolly Varden’ hat adorned with a hornbill’s feather.

The Dafla women are more modestly dressed, wearing a dirty cotton cloth wrapped round their bodies and kept up apparently by faith. Round their ankles they wear cane anklets so tightly bound as to cause the flesh to bulge above and below. I had one special friend among the women—the Bride of Bulu. Bulu was was also an interpreter, and a fine-looking Dafla when we first knew him, which was shortly before his marriage.

Bulu had married his bride ‘by capture’, a custom which is recognized by Daflas, but which was unusual on the plains, where marriages generally take place after a deal of bargaining and negotiation. Marriage by capture is more often a love match carried out against the parents’ wishes—possibly more common among the innermost recesses of the hills, but among the Daflas living near the plains Bulu’s marriage was something to talk about. In marriage by capture the suitor, having decided on the girl he most desires, goes to her village and takes her away with him. Having captured your bride you pay for her afterwards, her price being reckoned in terms of *mithun*, the domesticated bison of the hills, pigs, necklaces and—most valuable of all—clapperless bells made of silver, bronze or pewter, such bells being known to the people as ‘Thunderbolts’ or ‘God’s Bell’.

Bulu, having recently captured and paid a flattering price for his bride, brought her to see me, and she and I became good friends, though neither of us understood one word of the other’s language. I used to save up scraps and lengths of material, old dresses and cushion covers to give to Mrs. Bulu when she called. She invariably brought me a small gift of eggs, sometimes a chicken, and once a woven cane stool which I valued for many years and now mourn since it was lost during our final exodus from India.

Mrs. Bulu loved my gifts of cloth and clothing. She never (thank Heaven!) tried to dress in European style, but she utilized my gifts to extend and adorn her own fashions. She showed real ingenuity in the way she would wear a cretonne curtain, a silk dress or a pair of cami-knickers as an orthodox part of her own dress.

She also proved herself to be a very dignified little hostess when she invited us to tea in her own house.

We had already discovered that a Dafla house must be entered with care if the whole flimsy erection is to stand up to weight and

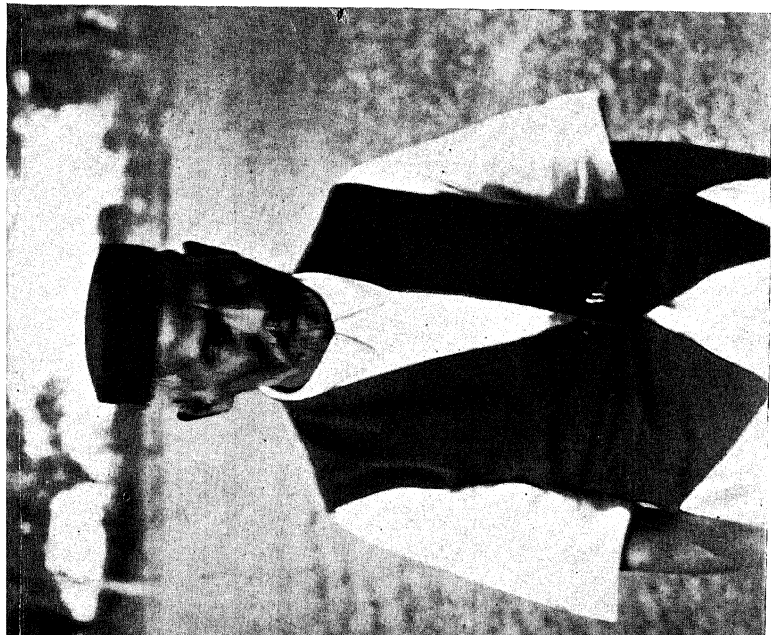
movement. The houses are built of bamboo and seem to have been slung together in a hurry, certainly not (one would think) with sufficient care to make them of lasting value, though actually these houses are far stronger than they look and may last for seven or eight years. The floors of split bamboo interlaced like basket-work shake and wobble with every movement, and in the larger houses, which are as much as twenty yards long, it is astounding that the places hold together at all. As a rule, several families occupy one house, each family having its own hearth so that these highly inflammable buildings often have four or five open fires burning merrily among stone circles at intervals along the shaky floor. The eye-smarting smoke of a Dafla interior is unendurable to anyone but a tribesman born to such conditions.

The Bulu home was not a large one, having been recently erected for the accommodation of Bulu and his bride. It was divided into two rooms, the bedroom being fitted with no furniture beyond a large mosquito net hung above that part of the floor where the bridal couple slept.

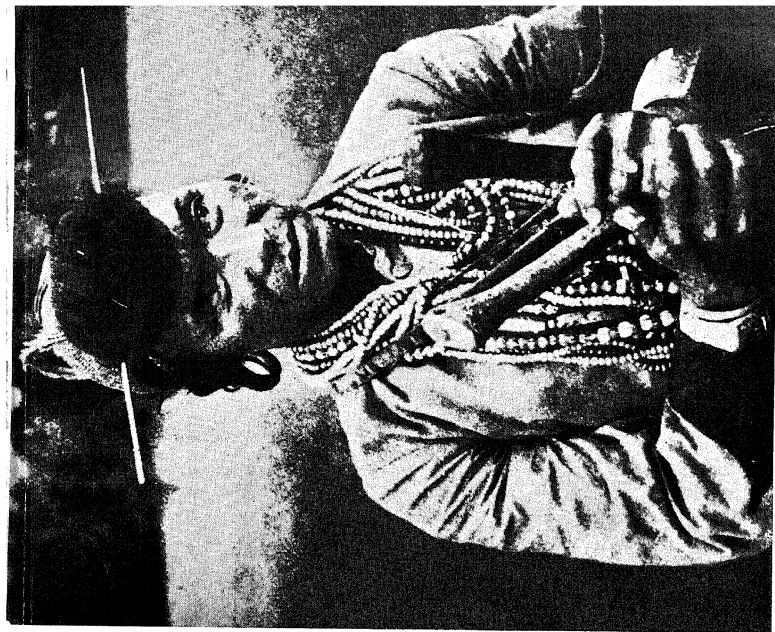
There was little more furniture in the living-room, where we sat upon home-made cane stools and were served by Mrs. Bulu, who poured out tea, faintly grey in colour, and plied us with tinned biscuits as well as little confections of her own making, most of them ferociously spiced with curry and chillies. This tea party took place some weeks after Mrs. Bulu's angry father and an uncle had lodged a case against Bulu for having 'stolen' his bride. My husband had to try the case which was, after days of extremely noisy argument, settled according to the tribal law of the Daflas, Bulu agreeing to pay a handsome price.

Another of our Dafla friends was young Moniram, a boy who came to us asking for a job so that he could buy a blanket for the cold winter nights. His only covering at nights was a cow-skin, dry and hard as a board. Thinking of my own need for two or three blankets and a hot bottle on those cold, misty nights of the Assam winter, I felt sorry for Moniram, so he joined our staff as odd-job boy. He was a nice, smiling unspoilt lad in those days, but in after years both he and Bulu got into bad ways. Moniram became a sponging scrounger and Bulu an aggressive drunkard. I hope that poor little Mrs. Bulu did not suffer much.

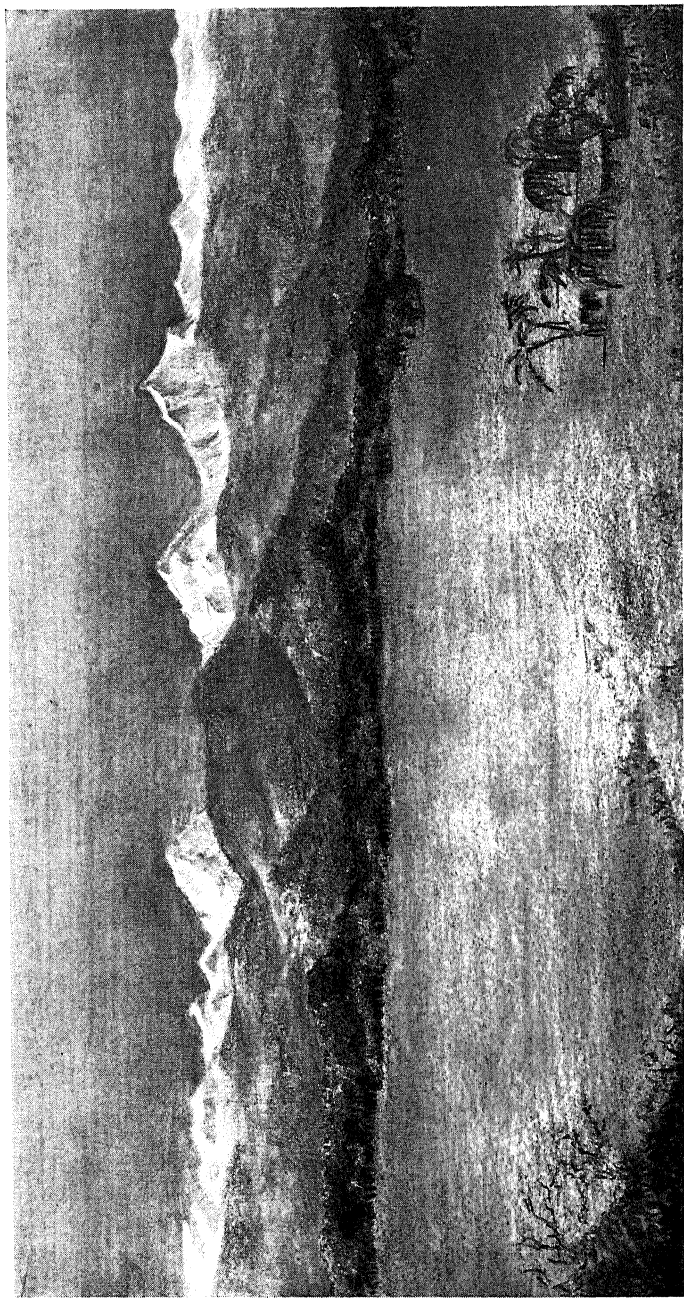
Most of our Dafla friends from the nearby villages in the forest had originally been captives used as slaves among the more primitive villagers far away among the hills. As slaves they had escaped and sought the protection of the plains—as dwellers on the plains they had become demoralized by the touch of civiliza-



'Bawarchi', the Old Cook



Karu, Dafia Interpreter



Himalaya—The Se-La Range

*Drawing by the Author*

tion. They tended to abandon all their old customs and traditions, aping the more showy and less lovable ways of the typical plainsman of Assam. I don't remember Karu being tainted by civilization. He was always a heavy drinker, but that was the custom of his country. It was from him that we learnt a great deal about the Daflas. We also learnt much—about all the tribes—from a very faithful friend, Dwarikanath Das\*, the head clerk in my husband's office. Dwarikanath often accompanied us on our journeys and was at all times an interesting and valuable companion. We still hear from him, at least once every year. His letters are written in English which would shame many an Oxford undergraduate, and he keeps us informed of the latest developments along those frontier hills. One of the first things we wanted to know was the origin of the name 'Dafla'. Neither Karu nor anyone else could tell us this. The word, in fact, was not used by the people of the country; they called themselves 'Bengni', a word probably derived from a Tibetan word meaning a 'subject' or 'a man'.

I have said that Karu was a sorcerer. This profession gave him something of the status of a witch-doctor, since he was known to be closely in touch with the spirit world.

Of all animist peoples we have known we thought that the Daflas' world contained more malignant spirits than any other. These spirits were liable to attack at any moment, and disease and misfortune were always put down to the malignancy of spirits. The sorcerer, or '*nyebu*', alone could appease or exorcize such spirits.

Karu was a particularly powerful sorcerer because he was himself able to cast spells upon people. For this reason nobody dared to speak ill of him lest misfortune fell upon them. It was Karu who first told us about the Dafla oaths and their methods of trial by ordeal. No sooner had we heard of this than we longed to witness such a trial. Our chance came when my husband had to try a murder case which could not be solved by conventional criminal codes—a case which had to be tried by Dafla law.

\* Now *Rai Sahib*.

## The Law of the Jungle

OF all the hill tribes we had known, the Daflas were the only people to be deliberately cruel. We did not reckon the head-hunting of the Nagas as a cruel practice because it involved swift death without suffering for the victim. The Daflas, though, were pretty ruthless in their treatment of their fellow men. They had a nasty way of dealing with prisoners—confining a man for months, or even years, with a log of wood fitted over the victim's leg, pinning him to the ground. In tribal warfare they 'hamstring' their enemies by cutting the tendons at every joint, a custom certainly not worthy of being preserved.

The murder case my husband had to try concerned the death of a young girl in the house of a man called Harré, an unprepossessing looking Daffa. The girl had died of a ruptured spleen which *might* have been caused by a heavy fall, or it might have been caused by a blow. There were no marks of violence on the body, but the villagers were talking, alleging that Harré had knocked the girl down and kicked her. Chief among those who accused Harré was a man named Rayom. Rayom's character was not unblemished—his record, in fact, was so bad that his evidence was wholly unreliable. Added to this, Harré and all his family had sworn his own innocence upon the tiger's tooth. Among primitive people the oath on the tiger's tooth is usually binding, and at that time we had no reason to doubt the sacred meaning of such an oath among the Daflas. We had seen the oath administered among the Naga hills, and we had seen the deadly results of swearing falsely on the tiger's tooth. In the Naga hills this oath is so revered that those who dare to swear falsely have been known to die of their own guilt.

When, therefore, Harré swore his innocence upon the tiger's tooth it was reasonable to assume that he was innocent. It was not until after the case was dropped that we learnt that among the Daflas the tiger's tooth oath can be easily charmed away by a simple ceremony, without even the help of a sorcerer. To charm away the evil effects of a false oath it is only needful for the swearer to dig a small hole near the entrance to his house. An egg is then broken and thrown into the hole together with the head and body of a decapitated fowl. After that the hole is filled up and a small stone placed upon the top while the oath-breaker recites the charmed words:

"*Sülogalako dingdungno gamkhumäbo*"—meaning: "From today the oath is powerless to bite".

Many solemn oaths are sworn by the Daflas on other tokens, all of them equally simple to charm away. Besides the tiger's tooth a man may swear by his *dao* (or axe); an arrow or a spear; earth taken from a grave—or on certain kinds of jungle creeper which grow back every year. The only oaths that are truly binding to a Dafla are those sworn under the two great ordeals—one by boiling water, the other by hot iron.

Now it happened that not long after the acquittal of Harré on a charge of murder, Karu reported that a ghost had been seen in Harré's house. Karu himself had been sent for to try to get rid of the ghost. The appearance of this ghost was an evil thing for Harré because it had taken the form of a tiger—proving itself to be damaging evidence of murder. The Daflas maintain that this ghost, known as *Senyo urem*, appears only where cases of violent death have taken place. If the death is due to murder the ghost, in the form of a tiger, haunts the murderer's house and cannot always be exorcized by even the greatest cunning of the sorcerer. Without the sorcerer's help the haunted man will surely die.

Karu told us that he had, at great expense, managed to drive away the *Senyo urem*, but, he added, the ghostly visitor was certain proof that Harré had been guilty of the murder of the girl. The whole district was now convinced of Harré's guilt and demanded justice. The case could not be tried again according to the formal criminal code, but it was obvious that something must be done to avert a riot among the Daflas.

Both Harré and his vehement accuser, Rayom, were called before my husband, and both of them with equal passion stuck to their original stories—Rayom yelling his certainty that Harré had knocked the girl down and kicked her to death. They were asked if they would like to have the case settled according to their

own law, that is, by means of one of their greatest oaths—the *Sodung dingdung*, or ordeal by boiling water. Without a moment's hesitation both Harré and Rayom agreed to this suggestion. They seemed in fact so satisfied by the prospect that they almost shook hands.

We ourselves were intensely interested in the plan. Having already spent some years among primitive tribes, we felt no scepticism about the performance, but we were determined to watch as closely as we could so as to arm ourselves against the inevitable scepticism of friends. In spite of this, although we were eye-witnesses throughout, we still find it difficult to convince others of the reality of what happened.

However, before the great oath could be taken a deal of fuss and bother had to be endured. In the first place Harré began to give trouble in a way that strengthened opinion against him. The *Sodung dingdung* oath required the presence of a special sorcerer. Karu could not administer the oath because his wife was expecting a baby—and no sorcerer with a pregnant wife may undertake the ceremony. Harré's first demand was that seven sorcerers must be present. This number was quite unnecessary, and it is probable that Harré was playing for time as he knew that no such number of sorcerers was available. He then decided that two sorcerers would be enough, one for himself and one for Rayom. Even this number could not be arranged because, although three gifted sorcerers lived two miles away, two of them (one of the two being Karu) had wives who were pregnant.

During all the clamour and argument Karu's husky voice could be heard clucking his opinion in the guttural Dafla tongue. From the upper veranda of our house I could hear the noise going on in the office just a few yards away. Although I knew roughly what it was all about I could not understand a word, but the din from the office had long become the natural accompaniment to my quiet mornings while the dogs lay sleeping. Frequently I recognized my husband's voice bellowing above the din when it became too much for him. On one of those mornings during the Harré-Rayom dispute I was startled by a desperate yell from my husband. Fearing lest the tide of battle had turned against him I dropped my work and ran to the veranda rail in time to see him drop to the ground after a quick get-away through the office window. He was panting and fanning himself with a file of papers.

"What's happened?" I called.

He gasped out: "Karu blasted," using the word by which we



described a natural but noisome offence embarrassingly common amongst dogs. Karu's offence had been so rank that it had been necessary to clear the office and allow a current of fresher air to blow through the place.

After a reviving breather the court sat again, and the question of a sorcerer was finally settled. It was agreed that one called Tachung Sengda should administer the oath.

But first Tachung Sengda demanded a guarantee that he be absolved from all blame if either Harré or Rayom came to any harm. This condition was agreed to; it was considered reasonable because not long ago a man, whose father had died after swearing a false oath, had brought a case for damages against the sorcerer involved.

On the evening before the trial by ordeal the atmosphere of excitement, like that of the office at midday, was overpowering. We could think and talk of nothing else, both of us wondering if there was going to be a catch in it, whether or no we should be disillusioned by the ceremony. We were anxious about the weather, too. The monsoon was upon us and, though it was not raining that evening, the sky hung low and heavy with rain. We did not want rain to spoil the ceremony next day. There was no air at all that evening; an oppressive stillness, saturated with moisture, drained the vitality from everything. The forest waited motionless, trees standing in dark pools of water, the grass-grown frontier road soggy underfoot. Because of the heaviness of wet heat we could not enjoy the usual evening walk along the road, so we took the dogs to a jungle stream and waded with them into the forest, splashing through the tepid water.

Next morning dawned murmurous with the voice of villagers crowding round the office and moving along the frontier road towards the clearing in the forest where the trial was to take place. Only those villagers whose wives were pregnant were unable to join the crowd. If such men had come their wives would undoubtedly have had miscarriages.

Meanwhile, Harré and Rayom had been preparing for the trial by ordeal. Neither of them had been seen the previous day because they were away in the forest observing an essential part of the ceremony, that of spending twenty-four hours together with the sorcerer in the depths of the forest. The reasons for this, as far as we could ascertain, seemed to be mixed up with an idea that, in the solitudes of the jungle, the presiding spirits could examine the conscience of each man without interference from the world of men. The jungle vigil also ensured that no harm

from the spirits called up by the sorcerer befell the villagers. While alone with his clients the sorcerer had to wash and cut the nails of each man's left hand—also to watch carefully to see that neither of them spat upon the palm of his left hand. Karu had already explained to us these precautions, adding that they were necessary in order to prevent the men from inserting under their nails lime, which would prevent the trial working properly.

Until Karu brought us word that the right moment had come we did not leave the house on the day of the trial, though we had already seen the servants trooping along, determined to miss nothing of the show. Eventually Karu appeared, lamenting that he was not allowed to attend the ceremony owing to the pregnancy of his wife. So we went off with the head clerk, and with Bulu and Moniram, who guided us to a part of the forest where the jungle had been cleared specially for the occasion. There were old rubber trees growing round the clearing, and those villagers and Daffas unable to find good places in the crowd had climbed into the trees and were seated in rows along the branches.

Somebody had provided chairs for us to sit on, placing them immediately in front of the small enclosure that had been prepared for the ordeal. The enclosure had two openings, each of them just large enough to admit one man. At the opening on the north side the sorcerer stood upon a small ramp built of four wooden stakes. In the centre of the enclosure a fire had been kindled, fanned to white heat by winnowing trays. In the middle of the fire a bamboo vessel, or *chunga*, such as are commonly used in the villages, contained water brought from the Borelli River, the great river whose unknown source is thought to come from the snows of the Se-La range. Bulu told us that the water used for the ordeal *must* be drawn from a large river, not from one of the wandering jungle streams such as we had been paddling in the previous evening. He also told us that into the vessel of water certain charms must be cast. These included: a tiger's tooth; a small stone; the leaves of a virulent stinging nettle; the bark of a certain fig tree—and the bark of a peculiarly lovely jungle tree, *Tetrameles nudiflora*.

All these charms (except the stone, for which we could not discover the reason) possess powers to 'bite' or sting. The bark of that kind of fig tree causes itching. The other tree, conspicuous in the jungle by its enormous size and board-like, buttressed roots, is the home of an evil spirit. These, therefore, with the tiger's tooth and the nettle leaves, resulted in a hell-brew of great potency.

While we waited for the trial to begin the rest of the audience

kept up an excited babble of talk not unlike the chatter of monkeys, which they certainly looked like, milling about on the ground and clinging to the branches of the trees. Suddenly the talk died down and a hush descended on us all as the sorcerer moved towards the fire, swinging a leafy branch backwards and forwards across the flames—muttering his incantation:

*"Amebanung, mingbanung, gento  
Amebanung, mingnâbabung, gamio!"*

—a near enough translation being:

*"Having murdered, if I lie  
May the water bite me!  
If I lie not, having killed not,  
Water will not bite me!"*

The word 'bite' is used by the Daflas to describe any form of vicious attack, from mauling by a tiger to the sting of a nettle or the scalding effects of boiling water.

While the sorcerer fanned the flames and repeated his incantation we anxiously watched the water simmering in the bamboo vessel. We could see steam rising from it, but it had not quite come to the boil when Harré appeared.

He had unwound his knob of plaited hair, which now hung loose down his back. Over his right shoulder he carried his axe, and—except for his fig-leaf apron—he was naked.

He stepped into the southern opening of the enclosure—little more than a yard from where we sat watching—and threw out his left hand swiftly, flourishing it across the simmering water, but not plunging it *into the water*. At the same moment the water boiled up and splashed the back of his hand which he snatched away, and then dashed out of the enclosure, running among the audience displaying an unblistered hand. He had hardly had time to leave the enclosure before Rayom (wild and naked as Harré) rushed in, shouting as he came:

*"Amebo binkhumâ gamio!"* ("I have not lied—do not bite me!")  
—before he shoved his arm, up to the elbow, in the boiling water.

Now, every Daffa knows that if a guilty man swears a false oath in this way the boiling water will rise up and 'bite' him before he has time to plunge his arm into the vessel, and we had all seen how Harré had merely waved his arm *above* the water. We had also seen the water boil up and splash his hand.

Both Harré and Rayom were now hurrying round displaying

their hands, coming first to my husband, who immediately felt their hands, noticing that Rayom's was not only unscathed after its immersion in the boiling water but was also surprisingly cool, while Harré's hand was feverishly hot.

A clamour of protest was rising among the audience. Those on the ground thrust themselves forward, arguing and accusing, and the rest of them came swinging down from the branches among the trees, all of them convinced that Harré's guilt was proved by the ordeal. It was suggested that he might care to try his luck a second time, but already he was overcome—lying on the ground, surrounded by his friends.

Rayom showed no concern at all. He strode across to the sorcerer who was still waving his branch in a kind of trance, continuing to repeat his incantation. At that moment a small fowl was produced, its head was cut off with a single blow, and its carcass thrown upon the fire.

This was Rayom's moment. Facing inwards towards the fire, he stood up and shouted the final words of triumph:

“The fire was made, and Rayom saved!  
For this a fowl is slain.  
Scatter the fire and put it out—  
Smash the *chunga* now—because  
Such is Dafla law.”

—after which he scattered the fire to extinguish it, and smashed the bamboo *chunga* with his axe.

We heard a howl from all the Daflas present, a kind of wailing noise consisting of a prolonged “ho” alternating with a peculiar humming through the nose. In the stillness of the forest the noise was indescribably eerie.

The trial by ordeal was over. We returned to our house—perhaps a little disappointed. For all that we could see, nothing was proved because neither man had taken any harm from the boiling water. Blisters might come later, but so far there was nothing to choose between Rayom and Harré. Only the Daflas seemed satisfied.

Later in the day, however, news came that Harré (who certainly had *not* immersed his arm in the water) was very ill, vomiting and in great pain. Rayom was reported to be boisterously fit, though complaining of itching on his hand and arm. My husband examined both men next morning. Harré was undoubtedly ill and there were large blisters on his fingers. The skin of Rayom's arm was thickened and rough (as though from a

nettle sting) but there was not a sign of a blister anywhere—though he still complained of intolerable itching, the sort of itching induced by the same sort of nettles as had been brewed in the *chunga*.

As the days passed Harré became worse. His friends moved him away from the district where he had become dangerously unpopular. Some time later we heard that he had died in a remote village in the hills. As far as we know, Rayom is alive today.

No logical explanation can be given of the ordeal by boiling water—nor of the ordeal by hot iron, which is the only other oath taken seriously by Daflas. We don't try to argue with those who doubt the reality of what we witnessed; sometimes I manage to appease them by putting forward a theory of my own, which is—that boundless superstition allied to primordial ignorance induces a power of faith able to overstep the laws of scientific fact. I am also convinced that, through education, civilized man has lost a sixth sense that enables primitive people and animals to be aware of things beyond the reach of reasoned thought. Over and over again in our lives among such people, and in the remoteness of the mountains where we have lived awhile 'apart from the world', we have seen and experienced things which amounted to something more than the triumph of mind over matter.

## *Pests*

LONG before I knew India or had travelled in the jungle I shared with others the exaggerated idea that India is a land infested with snakes and tigers. Less than one year in the country dispelled this illusion. In fifteen years in India I saw far fewer snakes than I tripped over or trod upon during a two months' visit to Vancouver.

When a snake, particularly a poisonous one, is encountered in India the whole village, town or district talks about it for several weeks, which proves that such encounters are rare enough to be sensational. Throughout our years of living and travelling in the jungle I remember only three narrow escapes from poisonous snakes. The first occurred when we found a Russell's Viper coiled up on the path a foot in front of me. My bull terrier, Liz, had already walked over it and was waiting for us a yard or so ahead, bewildered by the shouts of those who pulled me back in time to stop me from treading on the snake. It must have been sleeping off a good meal, for it never moved and was easily killed by a blow from a flexible cane.

The second encounter was more alarming. Once again Liz and I had a narrow escape. The bull terrier was, as usual, walking ahead of the column of porters, and I was following about ten yards behind her when a large cobra shot like black lightning down a hillside, making for the path just behind Liz. The whole column of porters, led by my husband, raised such a shout of warning that the cobra made the smartest right-about-turn I have ever seen, and was half-way down another mountain and out of sight before I had time to realize the danger. Which proved to us again what we already knew—that cobras do not attack on

sight. *If* either the dog or myself had happened to be exactly in the path of its journey it might have struck. But a loud noise will usually scare away most creatures of the jungle, particularly if the noise is made by man.

Our third snake, also a cobra, was found by chance lying under the spaniel's bed one night. My husband shot it and bespattered the room from floor to ceiling with snake-meat and blood, a display we proudly showed off to our guests at a dinner party the following evening.

Three snakes in fifteen years are not enough to justify their wriggling into a chapter called 'Pests', certainly not to justify India's reputation as a land teeming with snakes. Yet others besides ourselves may spend a lifetime in the country and seldom see more, if as many.

As for tigers, enough has been written about them to deter me from describing our every encounter with the beautiful creatures. Of course there are tigers—plenty of them if you know where to look for them—but only rare chance or determined knowledge of the jungle will enable you to see one in its natural home. We had the chance and we had the knowledge, and we saw most of the animals of the Assam forests. They played, in fact, so much a part of our lives that their place in this book must wait for a later chapter.

The really dangerous creatures of the forests of India are the insects and the leeches. In the foothills these pests were so malignant that we had a job learning how to defeat them—and they *had* to be defeated as we went along climbing through great tracts of uninhabited forest over the foothills to the countries belonging to the people of the hills. In alphabetical order the insects included: ants, bugs, cockroaches, *dam-dims*, hornets, horse-flies, mosquitoes, sandflies, ticks, wasps—and many others whose names I have forgotten, probably because their nuisance value was negligible.

I don't remember that we bothered much about the ants; there were millions of them and their variety was infinite, but they did not worry us as long as we could keep them out of the food. Once I ate a biscuit in a hurry on a dark morning in camp—and had to spit the biscuit out in a greater hurry when I found my tongue swarming with minute ants that were stinging like vicious soda-water. Once a very large black ant walked on to my bare foot and deliberately tore open the flesh with its claws (or whatever an ant has), making me bleed copiously. The attack was entirely unprovoked; I had done nothing to annoy the brute.

On the whole we were lucky about bugs. These dirt-loving creatures shunned the forest and its lonely ways, but we had experience of them in villages and in our own house. In the towns and villages they were so common that many people had to accept them as a natural part of life. My husband once had to try a case in which a clerk sued a man for false pretences. In this case the accused had set up as a kind of sorcerer, claiming his ability to effect magic cures for an unmentionable disease.

"He bade me," said the clerk, "eat a banana with a bug in it. He had a banana but no bug. So I went to my bed and fetched him a bug." It was as simple as that, but the cure did not work.

Cockroaches were a horror to which I never became used, though I learned how to cope with them. So did Liz. She never missed a cockroach and took such keen delight in hunting and destroying them that I felt almost mean when I spoiled her sport by laying down borax and sugar in all likely places at the start of the cockroach season. At first I thought the effect of borax was sheer magic because the cockroaches just disappeared. Later I was told by an entomologist that a diet of borax prevents the brutes from breeding.

*Dam-dims* was the local name given to one of our worst enemies, a small fly which raised blood-blisters wherever it bit—which was on every exposed part of the body. You did not feel the little wretches biting you, but shortly afterwards you began to itch furiously without being able to locate the exact place where you itched. The first time we were bitten by *dam-dims* we itched all over throughout the night. After that we discovered how to deal with the trouble. We learned to look for the tiny blood-blister and to squeeze out the blood immediately. Neglected blisters were liable to cause serious skin trouble or blood-poisoning, and, if near one's feet or ankles, lymphangitis caused such painful swelling that walking became impossible. The only way to avoid *dam-dims* was to wear ankle-tight breeches, high-necked shirts with long sleeves—and insecticide all over your hands and face.

Once in the Aka country (where the *dam-dims* are appalling) we had with us a friend who was bitten at lunch-time on her lip—the only place where insecticide could not be applied. Within seconds her lip had swollen till she resembled one of those African belles who wear discs like saucers to enhance the glamour of protuberant lips.

Hornets frighten me more than any other insect. They are much too large, their sting is awful, and I take cover the moment



I hear the menacing boom of their wings. In the Assam hills there was a particularly ghastly hornet, steel-blue in colour, whose sting was fatal. I only once saw it, and I made straight for our tent and remained under the mosquito-net until the all-clear was given, the hornet having been killed by one of our brave Nepali porters. The large black orange-banded hornet was unpleasantly common. We were never stung by one ourselves, but Tim, the spaniel, suffered badly from an attack by one of these.

We were moving from one hill-village to another, and for the first five or six miles of our journey there were clusters of hornets drinking the sap from trees whose bark had been slashed by villagers. One of the hornets stung Tim while he was using a tree for a dog's purpose. We applied soda-bicarbonate and gave him an aspirin, and he seemed all right until we reached the inspection bungalow at the end of our journey, when he began to vomit, and continued to vomit throughout the evening and all through the night. By next morning he was so weak that we could not risk him on the twelve-mile march ahead of us. I hated the idea of spending another night in that place where the bungalow was old, rotted with neglect, and haunted by civet-cats and repulsive pigs from the village. We named it The Pig and Civet.

The night before, during one of Tim's vomiting bouts, we had found a horrifying centipede emerging from the broken earthen floor. Further, the earth-closet was full of bats. It was the usual kind of place—a sort of summer-house in which a wooden tripod was erected above a deep pit. The bats were nesting in the sides of the pit and they came flying up from their bawdy home every time you opened the door. I don't remember anything in favour of the Pig and Civet.

Nevertheless, it was imperative for my husband to move on the next day, and as Tim was not fit to travel there was nothing for it but for me to remain with the dogs, staying alone for three nights at the Pig and Civet, until the others could return from their work at the next two villages.

For those three nights and the better part of three days I lived in unmitigated dread of centipedes, continually examining every square inch of the broken walls and cracked floor, groping round at night with a torch (whose battery was nearly spent) and finally pulling the dogs with me on to my camp bed, tucking the mosquito-net round us as tightly as possible. The degraded-looking pigs, rooting and grunting under the bungalow, the civet cats, even the bats in the earth-closet were welcome company

compared with the dreaded centipedes whose sting would have been fatal to the dogs.

I find poisonous centipedes the most horror-filling creatures in the world; they are so black and evil, and their hideous barbed legs (the first pair charged with venom) scraping over wood or stone are nightmarish beyond description. Experts say that if a centipede crawls up your leg or arm the thing to do is to touch the right end (whether head or tail I could never remember) with a lighted match or a cigarette end, which will cause the creature to retreat. Whether it retreats up or down the limb I don't know. In any case I would not know which was its head or its tail; they are made in sections, all of which look the same to me. I can only feel thankful that I was never crawled over by one.

The horse-flies which we found in the jungle were nasty things like enormous bluebottles, only they were a dirty grey colour. They buzzed noisily and were able to bite an elephant viciously, causing those tough-skinned animals to bolt. They were particularly bad at one of our camps in the forest, a camp which I named Pestiferous Camp, under which name it is now marked on the ordnance map. At Pestiferous we had horse-flies, hornets, mosquitoes, sandflies, *dam-dims*, ticks and, of course, leeches. Otherwise the place was uninhabited, and Heaven knows what the blood-suckers fed on for the rest of the year, for we seldom stayed there for more than one night.

Mosquitoes need no comment. Like man, they range from the equator to beyond the Arctic Circle.

Sandflies were almost worse than mosquitoes, particularly in the Aka country. Nothing but smoke defeats the clouds of tiny stinging pests. In one of our camps they were so awful that life was bearable only when our eyes were smarting from the fumes of wood-smoke from the camp fire.

When in camp we used to have a bathroom built of bamboo, banana leaves, or thatch, according to the local vegetation. Our bath was a small canvas thing, not luxurious but marvellously comforting after the mud and toil of a day's march. Bath-time before supper was a joy we always looked forward to—but not in the sandfly country. That was the moment when they found you totally defenceless, and made the most of it. Eventually I defeated them by carrying a large smouldering log into the bathroom, allowing the wood-smoke to fill the place so that you could wash yourself only between intervals of nose-blowing and copious weeping. But it was better than being pricked, stung and nipped in every part of your body.

Ticks were the dogs' enemies more than ours—also the enemies of every animal in the field or in the jungle, though they fastened their clutches on to us as well. Like the ants, there were millions of them and they were of many kinds.

Wasps and wild bees did not worry us much but were best avoided. The dogs once knocked down a wasps' nest and most of us were stung. The effect on the dogs was disastrous for a while. Although pretty badly stung they recovered after a few hours but could not forget their fright for a long time. Tim never forgot. Whenever anything that buzzed came into the house he would always cast an anxious look round before going away to hide under a mosquito net.

Leeches, not being insects, are a pest apart, almost the worst pest of the jungle. In every account I have ever read of jungle travel the writers describe their leech troubles and their ways of dealing with them, yet never have I met or read of anyone who seemed to know the only way (as we discovered) of defeating leeches. People recommend the use of tobacco leaves stuffed inside socks and shoes, or the use of little bags of salt tied to a walking-stick, or the application of a solution of areca-nut to socks or shoes. We tested all these and found them inadequate, not to say useless.

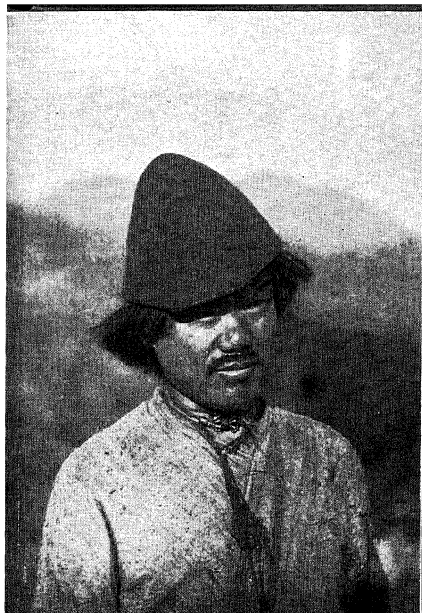
Early on in our wanderings my husband devised the only efficient preventative we have ever known. It was obvious that tobacco leaves, apart from being uncomfortable, were inadequate because the leeches could make their way in between the leaves. So we tried soaking tobacco leaves overnight in boiling water. By next morning this had produced a strong kind of tea which we poured over our socks and shoes, allowing it to soak in. We also applied it like paint to the porters' bare feet and ankles, and to the dogs' feet and ears. Before then, when we ended our marches the dogs used to have leeches clinging to their nostrils, eyelids, ears and most parts of their bodies, with at least one bloated leech stuck between each of their pads. By the time we had all unleechesed ourselves and the dogs the camp used to look like the scene of several bloody murders. The tobacco-tea invention changed all this. The solution, having saturated everything to which it was applied, left no area untainted where leeches dared penetrate. Nicotine is deadly poison to leeches, and though they still came looping towards us across the sodden track and dropping on us from the trees and undergrowth, they shrivelled up and died at their first contact with tobacco-soaked skin or cloth.

Even four hours' marching through torrential rain could not wash off the tobacco tea. Only once did it fail us; that was when we had to ford a river twenty-five times on a six-hour journey. The river, being a mountain torrent, swirled its waters against us every time we crossed it, moving waist-deep while we struggled to the farther shore. The rushing water, charged with debris, had scoured away the tobacco tea after our fifth crossing, and before long we had collected so many leeches that we had to give up trying to pull them off as we moved along. The commonest leech—a small black fiend, seldom more than half an inch long—betrays its attack at once by its vicious bite as it fastens itself on to the flesh. But there was a larger leech, a striped thing, that fastened itself on so gently that you were seldom aware of it until it finally dropped off, swollen like a tadpole—gorged with blood.

When leeches bite they inject into the blood a substance that prevents coagulation so that you go on bleeding out of all proportion to the size of the wound. One of the 'striped perishers' (as we called them) managed once to work its way high up my leg. I never felt it, and it had sucked its fill long before I was able to change into dry clothes after a long wet journey. The brute dropped on to the ground-sheet in the tent, and it was almost bursting with blood. From the tiny wound that marked its bite blood was pouring like water from a spout. I bandaged myself as best I could, but the bandage was soon soaked through and had to be renewed. By bedtime I thought I had stemmed the tide, but next morning I woke up more or less glued to the bed with blood. It was then that we tried the burnt-cotton-wool remedy. We singed a small piece of cotton-wool and stuck it over the leech bite. Immediately the fibres of the burnt stuff coagulated the blood and stopped the trouble.

The people of the Assam foothills were reckoned, not long ago, as 'hostile savages'. Some of them, especially those that live far away among the hidden mountain valleys, are still inclined to be 'treacherous and hostile'.

But none of the tribes could compete with the insects and the leeches that dominate the vast forests of the foothills.



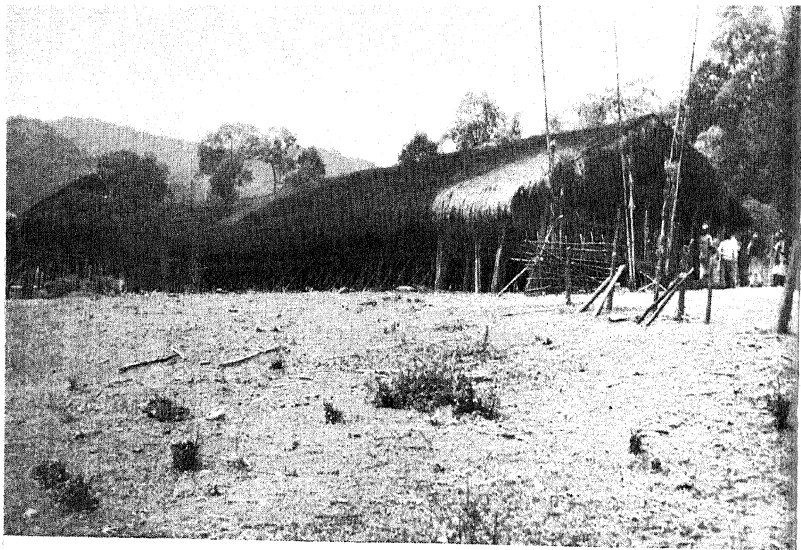
Gurth the Swineherd



The Grenadier Guard

A Dafla Village





The Aka Palace, Jamiri

Group of Khoas



## *Royal Family*

**A**LONG the eastern Himalayas, from the Mishmi country in the east as far as the Borelli River (which came out of the hills so near our house) the jungle tribes represented a primitive stage in man's development. These people were not cave-dwellers, such as may still be found among the Veddahs in Ceylon; they had learned to build houses, to make tools and to weave garments of the simplest kind. They had their own laws, customs and traditions which held good throughout their country. The social unit was the village, and the village headmen were their chiefs. Each tribe had its own language, but they had never invented an alphabet, and reading or writing were unknown to them. All of them were animists.

When we visited the Akas in their own country we found a people just emerging from the primitive conditions of life among the Daflas and the other tribes.

Very little is known about the Akas, who are proudly independent and who were once greatly feared by neighbouring tribes. The deep gorge of the Borelli River and the tremendous forests that clothe the mountains form a safe barrier between this country and that of the Daflas on the east.

Four to five days' journeying through the mountains, where leeches and the insects rule the world, separate them from the civilization of the plains. Even the leeches and the insects cannot destroy the loveliness of those forests. Only man can do that, and this he is certain to do—unless the insects win the day, as they might have done some millions of years before the Himalayas rose from the sea; still more millions of years before ever man appeared upon the earth; as they may

perhaps yet do if man insists on wiping himself out of the world.

The Borelli, gliding through its gorge, must be among the loveliest rivers in the world. In winter the water flows jade green between rocks that go shelving down beneath the forest. From rock and shingle the mountains rise steeply, heavily clothed in green, white trunks of trees showing like columns among the green. There are places where bare cliffs drop to the river, their rocky face veiled in threads of waterfalls, with clumps of moss and fern—dewed with spray—shining against the wet blackness of the cliff. Following the narrowing gorge we came to a part where the cliffs dropped so steeply to the river that the Aka road turned away and climbed higher into the forests.

Both going to and coming from the Aka country we had to camp near here at a place where a smaller river flowed into the Borelli. It was an utterly beautiful place but a perfect plague-spot for *dam-dims*. The close, saturated air was thick with swarms of the dangerous little yellow-banded blister-flies—also with the smell of citronella, our only defence against these insects.

The jade-green waters of the Borelli slipped along, deep and silent, hardly seeming to move against narrowing walls of cliff and forest. Close to our camp the jungle stream came foaming over boulders, tumbling out of the density of the forest, pouring its crystal waters into the Borelli. The heavy green of the forest, the deep green of the river and the clear waters of the stream made the place seem like some enchanted paradise. It was the reverse. The heat in the gorge was oppressively heavy, the *dam-dims* were awful, and the air (which should have wafted all the lovely scents of the jungle) was thick with the sickly smell of citronella.

At this camp we discovered, by accident, a significant link between the Akas and the other jungle tribes along the hilly frontiers of Assam. The discovery was interesting, but the accident was horrible and frightening.

Our facts about the Akas and their customs were obtained mostly from the Akas themselves, also from our friend, Ah Chung, who travelled with us as interpreter. Ah Chung was a Sikkimese and a wonderful linguist. He was also a man of great charm and goodness. He understood the various local languages as well as Hindustani and Assamese—and, of course, Tibetan, which most Sikkimese speak as well as their own language. We had known him for more than a year before we found that he could speak excellent English.

On our first journey to the Aka country we camped among



the *dam-dims* in the heat and the beauty of the gorge. As we approached the chattering jungle stream we found that Liz and Tim, who had trotted on ahead, were waiting for us, both dogs lying in the water asking for sticks to be thrown for them. We gathered some bits of sticks lying amongst the stones and threw them for the dogs to catch. It was one of those games which both dogs considered ought to go on indefinitely; they never wearied of swimming after sticks, and the game was specially good after a long journey through the airless heat of the jungle. But we were tired, and five minutes of 'Stick game' was enough for us; we called the dogs out of the water, dried them and settled down to tea.

About one hour later both dogs began to show symptoms of distress. They were shuddering as if feverish, and letting out little growls and moans of discomfort.

India is a country where the mildest canine symptoms may indicate the first stages of rabies, tick-fever, typhus—or any of the ghastly, and mostly fatal, diseases that threaten a dog's life in that country. At the first signs of drooping we had long been accustomed to nursing the dogs and watching them incessantly.

But that evening at the camp in the gorge, when we approached them to try and examine them for fever or pain, they backed away from us, growling and showing fear. Somehow or other we caught hold of them and then they began to scream as soon as we touched them; they made it impossible for us either to comfort or examine them.

We sat down in despair, a cold dread making us clammier than the jungle heat. Although rabies is usually impossible to diagnose in its early stages we knew that an unaccountable fear is often a characteristic symptom. We knew also, for certain, that neither dog had been exposed to the faintest risk of infection.

The terror of the dogs got steadily worse. They tried to bolt away altogether (another rabic symptom), and we could do nothing for them. We had to consider the possibility of rabies, but we could not believe it. If the dogs became worse, or if they died, we should have to cancel our tour, and return to Assam for a course of anti-rabic injections.

The possible loss of our dogs and the awful spectre of rabies haunted us, obliterating any disappointment we might have felt at having to abandon our journey to the Akas. We could go again to the Aka country, and we did go again—many times; but, if this were rabies there would be no more chance for Liz and Tim.

We have known people who would have shot both dogs at

once rather than risk waiting for certainty. But we knew that with rabies a dog does not go suddenly mad; it usually ails and droops, or is merely off-colour for some days before more definite symptoms develop—and up to an hour ago both Liz and Tim had been bounding with health. So we waited and racked our brains and nerves searching for an explanation of their trouble. All night long they sat with their shuddering bodies pressed against the flaps of the tent. We had managed to leash them so that they could not run away, but they had screamed appallingly when we touched them.

Next morning, still refusing the idea of rabies, my husband said:

"I can only imagine that they have picked up some kind of poison."

The word 'poison' reminded me of something. "Poison? Didn't Ah Chung say something about having to fetch water from the Borelli because the Akas had been fishing the stream? Do Akas poison streams for fish? And, if so, is it possible that the dogs——?"

My husband banged his hand on the table:

"I believe you've got it!" he exclaimed—and then we both remembered. In our anxiety over the dogs we had never connected Ah Chung's remark with the possibility of poisoning.

We remembered now that Ah Chung had told us that some Akas had been down fishing the stream from which our drinking water should have come, that it was, therefore, necessary to fetch the water from farther up, out of the Borelli. It was thus, through the violent illness of our dogs, that we learned that when Akas fish they use the same methods as the more primitive jungle tribes—that is, they poison a part of the river by beating the water with the pulped root and stem of a certain creeper. The first effect of this poison is to induce a wild excitement in the fish, making them leap violently about, afterwards becoming drugged and stupefied, when they can be easily caught by hand.

The fact that our dogs had bathed in the water could not have affected them since by the time we reached the river most of the poison must have been washed away from the pools. But we realized that the 'sticks' that we had thrown for them had been the castaway roots and stems of the poisonous creeper. The violent shuddering and fear displayed by Liz and Tim had its counterpart in the excitement induced in the poisoned fish. There was no doubt now that the dogs had been poisoned by the creeper stems.

We had to steel ourselves then to the piteous screams of the dogs as we grabbed them and forced doses of bromide down their throats. We always carried a well-stocked medicine chest on our travels; we had to be prepared for a variety of complaints and accidents among ourselves, the porters, the servants, the dogs and—most important of all—the villagers among whom we travelled.

By breakfast time the dogs were dozing fitfully and, though they still cowered away from us and tried to bolt, they were able to manage the journey up and over the hills into the more temperate climate where we camped that evening three thousand feet above the gorge. Thank Heaven the poison worked its way out, and two days later both dogs were trotting happily beside us when we climbed the final ridges before dropping down into the Tenga Valley below Jamiri, the chief village of the Aka tribe.

When we reached Jamiri we began to have a sort of idea that we were making our first steps towards the road to Tibet. This was because, as we noticed at once, the Akas were dressed in some ways like the people of Tibet, also, in the village there were prayer-masts and the ruins of a Buddhist temple.

Clothes in the Aka country were infinitely more civilized than the brief garments of the Daflas, and their fashions had obviously been influenced by Tibet. Men and women wore a loose, shapeless cotton garment (off-white in colour) hitched round the middle by a sash that allowed the top of the dress to form a pouch. The garment fell in folds to the knees, and those who did not wear felt Tibetan boots wore loose cotton gaiters to protect their legs from the *dam-dims*, as bad here as anywhere that we had known.

The women were so heavily draped in jewellery that it was difficult to make out the details of their dress. They wore a head-dress of silver plaques linked by innumerable silver chains. Round their necks they wore such a weight of silver necklaces, strings of beads and silver charm-boxes that one wondered how they managed to raise their heads at all, and their wrists were clasped by silver bangles bigger than handcuffs. Men and women had their ears pierced with large holes through which were thrust trumpet-shaped silver ear studs, each stud about twice as big as a pepper mill.

Many of them were strikingly good-looking, particularly the men, but the appearance of the women, and some of the men, too, was spoiled by their habit of smearing their noses and cheeks with a mixture of charcoal and resin. They told us that they did this to protect themselves from chaps or frostbite. We could only imagine that the custom must have survived from the days when

the Akas may have lived on the Tibetan plateau, or at any rate at a much higher and colder altitude than that of their present homeland which, as far as is known, is seldom higher than six thousand feet. Jamiri lay in a valley only three thousand feet high, far below the level of biting frost and snow.

During one of our visits to Jamiri the chief queen of the Akas made me try on all her movable jewellery. I tied the 'ear-trumpets' to my ears with bits of string, but the rest of the stuff—necklaces and charm-boxes—were hung round my neck till I found it impossible to lift my head, and felt as though I were chained to my knees.

Another big difference between the Akas and the other tribes was the fact that the Akas had progressed beyond the stage of taking orders from a village headman. The Aka rulers were kings and queens whose rank was passed on to their children. The power of the royal family was absolute, but as far as we could see there were no Akas who did not belong to the royal family. Those over whom they ruled were not Akas; they were a people calling themselves 'Khoas', a people who spoke a different language, lived in different villages—and all of whom worked as slaves for the Akas. In return for their work as cultivators, builders, fetchers and carriers the Akas gave them food and land, and evidently treated them kindly as both Akas and Khoas were on a friendly and apparently equal footing with one another.

Whenever we entertained the royal family, or they us, the Khoas came, too. There was no difference between the dress of the Akas and the Khoas except that the Khoa men went in for pill-box hats made of flattened bamboo adorned with bunches of leaves. Sometimes a particularly dashing young Khoa wore a cock's leg sticking up out of his hat.

When we first came to Jamiri we were greeted by a gathering of the royal family surrounded by a crowd of Khoas. Among the crowd we noticed a man wearing an army greatcoat with the words 'Grenadier Guards' in brass letters on his shoulders. He was a cheery looking Khoa, perhaps a bit exotic with his bamboo hat surmounted by a bunch of pineapple leaves, but I do not think he had dressed up for the occasion. He probably did not possess any other clothes, and he was bashful when we wanted to take his photograph.

Later we sent the photograph home to the colonel of the Grenadier Guards. We did not know the colonel, but we thought his regiment might be intrigued by the picture; we even imagined that they might frame it and hang it in the Mess. The famous regiment,

however, withstood the shock with its usual calm. The receipt of the photograph was acknowledged by the adjutant—with thanks, colonel's, on behalf of. The adjutant surmised that the coat had probably been 'obtained from the Jews'.

We were never able to find out how the Akas came to settle in that part of the hills, any more than we could find out whence the Daflas originally came to their present country. The Daflas themselves are content to claim the sun and the moon as their original parents—the sun being the mother, and the moon the father of their race—but everything points to their having migrated westwards along the hills. They have language, dress and traditional affinity with the Apatanangs to the east, and with the Miris beyond the Apantanang country.

The Akas, however, in every way suggest migration from Tibet a long time ago—probably in the days before Buddhism reached Tibet. They are animists and have remained so despite the efforts of Tibet, which country once sent a lama to try to convert them—without success. The group of prayer-masts in Jamiri, and the ruined temple, remain as witnesses of his efforts. The tall masts with their fluttering tatters of flags (printed with prayers on strips of cotton) rose high above the wooden houses. We wondered why the Akas allowed them to remain, but they are a happy-go-lucky people in most ways and possibly have preserved the prayer-flags under the impression that such symbols might benefit the village. It is possible that they may have vaguely incorporated the significance of prayer-flags into their animistic beliefs; they may think of them as having the power to keep away evil spirits. In such ways the outward show of differing faiths persists among the ritual of religions of the world.

As the Sherchokpas and the Sherdukpen (a Buddhist people loosely under the laws of Tibet) live up the Tenga Valley only eight easy miles from Jamiri, it is all the stranger to find the Akas still able to keep their independence. At least, it would have seemed strange to us, if we had never known them personally, and made good friends among the tribe.

Our most valued friend was King Dibru, a man who was as good and as charming as he looked. While he lived, his influence was strong among the tribe, but his cousin—Labi—though equally charming and good looking, was no worthy successor to Dibru. When we first knew him, Dibru was already pretty ill with consumption. He died little more than a year later.

Queen Kelomé was one of the most forceful, outspoken people we ever met. Unlike most of her tribe, she was unbelievably ugly,

having a large face that reminded one of a carnival mask. I could easily imagine old Kelomé scaring away any man, most of all a lama unused, presumably, to the society of women. Once when we were 'bidden to a reception' at the royal palace in Jamiri, Kelomé advanced upon us and greeted me warmly, remarking as she did so:

"You've aged a lot, anyway."

She spoke to us, as most of them did, in very bad Assamese, but always with vociferous good humour.

The royal family received us in an open space outside the palace, a one-storeyed building made of wood and thatched with palm leaves. It was a very large house measuring about seven hundred feet in length. As in the Dafla villages, a number of families occupied the same house, each family having its own quarters and a separate hearth. But, unlike the flimsy shacks of the Daflas, the Aka houses were sturdily built, showing a distinct advance on the jungle dwellings of the other tribes.

Outside the 'palace' a wooden table was spread with a feast for us. Apart from home-brewed rice-beer (of poor quality), the main dish consisted of enormous quantities of hard-boiled eggs. These would have been more tempting if, in their kindness, the Akas had not caused the shells to be removed. As it was, the lustre of the eggs was dimmed by dirty thumb-prints that were rather discouraging.

We ate them, though; at least, we ate some of them because we owed courtesy to our hosts. Also, we were hungry. Our dogs proved really helpful—they sat up and 'begged' for the eggs, and the royal family were so intrigued by their cleverness that they encouraged us to feed our eggs to Liz and Tim. They were particularly fascinated by Tim's long, drooping ears and curly black coat. The bull terrier, being shaped more like any sort of village dog, left them unimpressed until we aimed at her an egg which she caught in her mouth and swallowed whole. The Akas and Khoas shouted with delight over this trick, and began aiming eggs at Liz until none remained.

It was a good party, and we were able to return the Aka hospitality when they came to tea with us at our camp. Among the seven royal guests who came were King Dibru with his nice old wife (whose name I have forgotten), Dibru's cousin, Labi and his wife, son and daughter, Queen Kelomé—and King Billi, a cheerful monarch who was also a murderer.

We were told that Billi, suspecting a slave of treachery, had caused the man to be stood before him while arrows were shot

into him until he died. The Akas and Khoas did not approve of Billi's dirty work, although in their easy-going manner they brought him along to our party. The usual crowd of Khoas came, too, including the Grenadier Guardsman and a strange creature whom a friend of ours had named 'Gurth the Swineherd'. We could never find out whether Gurth was an Aka, Khoa or Sherchokpa. His dress betrayed no origin, and his hat (the shapeless crown of an ancient Homburg) gave us no clue. He was astonishingly dirty and had an unshaven look, not usual amongst beardless Mongolian people. But his perpetual grin and occasional hoarse laugh convinced us that he had a keen appreciation of life and fun. Gurth used to turn up in the most unexpected fashion wherever we went. He began to assume the character of a mascot on our journeys in those parts.

We arranged the royalties as best we could in a circle round our small camp table. Most of us had to sit on wooden boxes and improvised seats because we possessed only two camp chairs. When I passed the first cup of tea to Kelomé she frowned at it suspiciously and asked if it contained milk. Just in time I stopped myself telling her that it did, for I remembered that the Akas shared with their jungle neighbours an aversion to milk, which they regarded as a dirty excretion of an animal. This attitude to milk prevails among most of the more primitive tribes of Assam, who bring up their children, as soon as they are weaned, on rice-beer—with gratifying results.

At our tea-party we were using Klim; a large tin of it stood on the table. We showed the dried milk to our guests, telling them it was a kind of flour. They passed it round, examining it closely, smelling it and nodding their heads—finally deciding that they would like to taste it mixed with tea. We then suggested adding a little brandy to the tea, and one sniff of the brandy decided them in favour. From that moment the party never flagged. They ate everything we offered (pocketing some delicacies to take home) and were markedly partial to the soda-bread I used to bake among the ashes of the camp fire.

Finally, I held out my cigarette-case, offering it first to old Kelomé. Putting out a very dirty brown hand she removed every cigarette from the case, lit one and smoked it while she pouched the rest inside the folds of her dress.

For a while, after the party was over, we watched our guests returning to the village, making their way round the bends of the winding path that climbed up towards Jamiri. We were fascinated by the way the Aka men walked—sauntering in a

consequential way with one hand resting lightly on the hilt of their silver-handled swords. They all wore swords, manufactured somewhere in their own country, with beautiful silver scabbards made from melted rupees. They offered to have a sword made for us if we gave them twenty rupees. Sadly enough, this lovely sword was among a number of treasures lost during our various moves.

I think that one of the most regal characteristics of the Akas was the faintly insolent smile of the men as they strolled about fingering the hilts of their swords. Dibru in particular seemed to have cultivated (or been born to) that swaggering saunter, almost the last remaining token of the lost supremacy of the Akas.

Not so long ago they were feared far beyond their own country. In those days they were bold enough to raid the plains, on one occasion even breaking open the forest office and stealing the forest guard whom they took back with them as a prisoner to their own country. An armed expedition had to be sent to rescue the guard—but that was long before the days when we travelled amongst the Akas.

Knowing them as we did, it was difficult to picture them as a virile, warlike race. We saw them only in the days of their decline; a decline due largely to their having migrated from high mountains down to the enervating climate of low-lying valleys, such as the Tenga Valley at Jamiri.

Like so many of the hill-tribes, they do not seem to encourage the building up of large families, a fact which may be due to a naturally low birth-rate, or to somewhat barbarous methods of birth control; possibly both reasons have something to do with it. It was obvious to us that the Akas have become vitiated by their lazy way of life, depending on the Khoas to do most of the work.

Whatever the reason, the Akas are a dying race—their unwritten language, their legends and their history, even their very existence, liable to have been forgotten before anything of value can be learned about them.



## *The Seven Kings*

LEAVING Jamiri, after our first visit to the Akas, we followed up the Tenga Valley, moving on towards Rupa in the country of the Sherchokpas and the Sherdukpen—the country which we came to know as the home of the Seven Kings of Rupa.

Too often on our travels I have had reason to wish that a natural love of mountains had bred in me an equally natural love of dizzy heights, crumbling paths and primitive bridges, the sort of bridges designed by early man in the days when he had not quite forgotten the ape-like agility of his ancestors. The hills where we travelled abounded in this sort of bridge. Mercifully, I have never had to be pulled upside down clinging to a single rope—a kind of bridge that is popular in Tibet. I know I could not have negotiated such a bridge; half-way across I should have let go and fallen into the torrent foaming far below.

Before we could reach Rupa we saw that we must cross a cane bridge, the very sight of which turned me cold with fear. It was a suspension bridge slung high above the river; it consisted of large hoops of cane, each about one yard or so distant from the next, with thin strands of cane laid across as a 'footboard'. Ropes of cane attached to the tops of the hoops were fastened to wooden uprights at each end of the bridge, which was about fifty yards long and which looked more fragile than a spider's web, and far less safe.

By the time we reached the bridge our porters were already crossing it one at a time. We waited, watching each man as he mounted the notched log that served as steps up to the bridge, and we watched them moving over the flimsy cane, holding on to the hoops as they went. Every moment I expected to see them

fall down between the widely spaced hoops. I was certain they *must* fall, unless the whole bridge collapsed, an event which seemed perilously probable. Perhaps I wanted it to collapse. The Nepali porters knew no fear and they would be certain to find something to laugh about even at the bottom of the river. And I would be spared the horror of having to cross the bridge. No such accident happened, however, so when my turn came I shut my eyes tight and mounted the notched stick feeling as if I were mounting the scaffold.

The knowledge that I was being watched from both ends of the bridge forced me onwards. I was feeling my way with my feet, not daring to look down, trying to hold on to the hoops with outstretched arms that were not long enough to reach both sides at once. When you get near the middle of these bridges they begin to sag and sway, swinging from side to side. I had to swing myself with the motion of the bridge, feeling as if I were trying to walk along a hammock doing a kind of dance, making wild grabs with both hands—first on one side, then on the other, often failing to catch the hoop I was after so that I had to lurch round and cling for life to the hoop on the other side. Once or twice my foot slipped down between the hoops and hung sickeningly in space while I, never daring to look down, waved it about like an antenna, seeking something more or less solid to put it on.

I got to the end of the bridge at last and turned round to watch my husband, more than twice my weight, striding over the bridge carrying the dogs, one under each arm. When he was safely over we were able to enjoy watching the children of Rupa giving a display of how they crossed the bridge. They disdained the orthodox route, running lightly across the cane ropes that supported the top of the hoops. I smiled at them in rather a sickly way, trying to look as if I envied them, then we turned round to meet a crowd of villagers who were waiting to look at us. Among them was Gurth the Swineherd. We had not noticed him during our journey that day, so assumed that he had taken a short cut in order to be among the first to welcome us to Rupa.

Long before we reached our camp we saw prayer-flags fluttering from tall masts where the village lay, and here, by the roadside, we saw for the first time *Mendungs* and *Chortens*, those architectural emblems of the Buddhist faith, emblems characteristic of Tibet.

The *Mendungs* are small stone walls, the stones loosely held together with plaster or mud, enshrining tablets engraved with the words *Om Mani Padmi Hung*—"Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus

Bud!"—the same words that are printed on the prayer-flags; printed a thousand times or more on scrolls encased in prayer-wheels; carved on the face of rocks and boulders; repeated over and over again by lamas as they finger the beads of their rosaries. One might almost call *Om Mani* the "Ave Maria" of Tibet. Indeed, there are among the symbols of Lamaism so many outward similarities to (or imitations of ?) the symbolism of the Roman Catholic faith that it has been thought by some that Lamaic teaching must have absorbed into its practice some of the teachings of Jesuit missionaries who made their way into Tibet during the sixteenth century, or earlier.

*Mendungs* are so common a feature of Tibet and her neighbouring Buddhist countries that we have often passed them, hardly noticing them, which is not a good thing to do since good luck is supposed to attend your journey as long as you pass a *mendung* on the correct side—that is, as a rule, with one's right hand nearest to the wall.

If the glimpse of the prayer-flags in Jamiri and the near-Tibetan fashions worn by the Akas had made us feel one step nearer to the country beyond the snows, the approach to Rupa made us feel that we were almost there. In later years we found that we might have said that we had 'arrived', for we were told then by Tibetan friends that the Sherdukpens and the Sherchokpas are a people recognized as belonging to Tibet.

The Sherdukpens and the Sherchokpas form a branch of those people more generally known as Mombas, or Monyul, a name which, we were told, derived from a Tibetan word claimed to mean 'People of the low country'. Mispronounced (as all these words were), it might equally well have meant, in Tibet, a low or inferior people. Either description applies to the Mombas whose lands lie far below the levels of Tibet, which people would certainly be looked upon as inferior to the hardy dwellers on the high plateau. The name 'Sherchokpa' (used by the people of Rupa) is probably also derived from Tibet, and may mean 'robbers', which perhaps explains why these people have strayed so far from what must certainly once have been their homeland.

Farther up in the hills above Rupa the Mombas called themselves 'Sherdukpen'—or the Rulers of the Sher Valley where lies the village of Shergaon.

Except for the kindly hills and homelike woods of Rupa and Shergaon the two places were planned on the same lines as villages in the lower valleys of Tibet. The houses were stoutly built of wood with deep eaves and shingled roofs that made them

look like Swiss chalets. At Rupa there was a fort (which was a royal residence as well as a sort of monastery) built of stone, three storeys high, entirely in the tradition of Tibetan houses in the high regions where wood is difficult to get.

Tibetan architecture has beauty and dignity. The style has been imposed by necessity, and the severe rectangular lines, broader at the base, gradually, almost imperceptibly, narrowing towards the upper storeys, look as though designed to harmonize with the lovely architecture of their mountains.

The village was planted everywhere with prayer-flags, and over the mountain streams we found prayer-wheels. These are shaped like drums and contain a scroll of paper inscribed with innumerable repetitions of *Om Mani*, the scroll being tightly wound so as to fill the drum completely.

Prayer-wheels vary in size from the small, elaborately chased silver ones, which are carried about and twirled by hand, to huge things, six or ten feet high, such as we found in the neglected temple at Rupa. Prayer-wheels must be kept revolving round the central pin or pole, which is either twirled by hand or turned by the action of water where the bigger wheels are erected over streams. Often we saw prayer-wheels placed in niches of rock or walls where they could be given a twirl by the devout, or by anyone who passed that way. As long as the wheel revolves you are comfortably assured that the prayers inside are ascending to heaven, where the enlightened ones will surely enter a record in your favour and keep in mind your right to look for rebirth into a higher sphere of life.

The *chortens* (or *stupas*) form an outstanding feature of the Tibetan landscape. They are bulb-shaped masses of masonry, wider at the top than at the base, shaped like an opening bulb surmounted by a short spire which is usually made of wood and which springs from the middle of the top. They enshrine sacred relics and are built all over the hills, sometimes in groups, more often in solitude by the sides of lonely tracks, at the entrance to villages or in the village street. It is thought that *chortens* reveal an elaboration of the mounds, or tumuli, of earth piled above primitive graves. The pagodas of Burma appear to be another extension of this idea, the Burmese pagoda being an 'upside-down' form of the Tibetan *chorten*. Both are surmounted by spires, the great pagodas having their spires covered with gold leaf.

But the valleys of Rupa and Shergaon were far from being typical Tibetan scenery. They were as lovely and appealing as any valley in the Lake District of Cumberland. Rounded hills

swept down to meadows, hills that were thickly wooded with cypress forest, others patched with open woodlands of pine and oak—and everywhere there were wild strawberries. The strawberries were delicious, and the village children gladly gathered them for us in return for a few rupees. As we were able to obtain fresh milk at Rupa I tried to save the cream for our strawberries, and had collected almost enough when Liz discovered the bowl that stood on a rough shelf in the rustic 'dining-room' which our porters had built for us. I found the bull terrier wagging her tail gratefully as she licked the last of the cream off her nose.

An hour or so after our arrival in Rupa we were formally welcomed by the seven kings. The two villages of Rupa and Shergaon are ruled by a council, the members of which assume the title of kings. After our royal reception by the Akas we might have felt a bit *blasé* about kings and queens, but from what we had heard of the kings of Rupa we guessed we might expect to feel ourselves rise a bit in the social scale. Ah Chung had told us about the kings and about the language of their country. It seemed to be some sort of off-shoot of the Tibetan language, but it had never been written and, we gathered, was as different from true Tibetan as cockney is from Oxford English. It was Ah Chung who came to warn us of the approach of the seven kings.

Before very long we heard the noise of pony bells and of drums—and a sort of whining bag-pipey kind of band. The dogs barked and we stood up to see what was happening. In the distance we saw a procession moving slowly towards us. There were bands and music and crowds of people; and in the midst of them the seven kings.

To a world used to the spectacular thrills, and the eye-dazzling blaze of glorious Technicolour it may be difficult to convey the thrill of something infinitely simpler yet far more spectacular because of its unrehearsed reality. It was as if we had been able to step back into the Middle Ages—to watch the sort of pageant that thrilled the less complicated lives of our forebears. What we were witnessing was a natural part of the ceremonial life of the people—not a 'spectacle' planned by trained artists, rehearsed and cut and acted among the artificial scenery of the studio or the theatre. The setting of the show was the untamed beauty of the mountains, of the woods sloping down to the valley. The players were not acting; they were taking part in a show that had belonged to their lives for hundreds of years.

In front of the seven kings came a man carrying a banner of hand-embroidered silk. Then came a band consisting of a queer-

shaped drum, a stringed instrument that produced scraping, wailing noises, and a pipe that screeched like a lost soul. Behind the band the kings came riding in single file, each mounted on a white pony caparisoned with gaily coloured rugs and hung with bells that jingled round its neck. The kings were robed in ceremonial Tibetan dress—golden-coloured coats of brocaded satin, Tibetan boots and high-crowned hats of black velvet. After them came the crowd, with Gurth the Swineherd grinning possessively as if he had organized the whole proceedings. At the end of the procession came a man leading a yak.

The seven kings slid down from their horses and advanced to greet us. We shook hands. Conversation became cheery and general. Gifts were exchanged; we had brought for them bottles of 'country liquor' and cigarettes while the kings brought home-grown oranges and walnuts and a pair of Tibetan boots for me. They crowned their gifts by calling up the yak, which they presented to us.

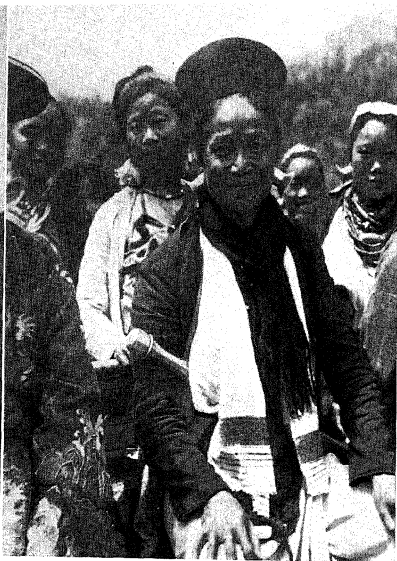
It was our first sight of a yak and we would have given much to have been able to have taken it back with us to our garden on the plains, but even at this altitude, six thousand feet, the poor yak was feeling the heat. He was accustomed to the bracing climate of Tibet and was finding the mild warmth of Rupa as oppressive as a Turkish bath. To have taken him down to our home nearly six thousand feet lower would have been hideously cruel. However, we thanked the kings, and convinced them of our gratitude by our wild enthusiasm. There is an indescribable charm about a yak, and the gentle hairy creature captivated us completely, winning our hearts and loyalty for the whole tribe of yaks.

In the course of our lives in Assam we had owned at different times a bear as a pet, and we had had a deer; we had possessed a pangolin, and we had kept an otter; later we were presented with a bison, and (most enchanting of all) we also acquired a young rhinoceros; but we never had a yak. Our headquarters were always located at too low an altitude for those enchanting creatures. We like to remember that the first yak we ever encountered was a gift to us from the seven kings.

The chief king was an old man called Wangya. He did most of the talking (in bad Assamese), but we found that the handsomest king, a much younger man, was the most intelligent and the most reliable. Wangya was too convivial. I doubt if we ever saw him completely sober; he was certainly pretty tight when he greeted us that day at the head of the royal procession. Before



Dibru, King of the Akas



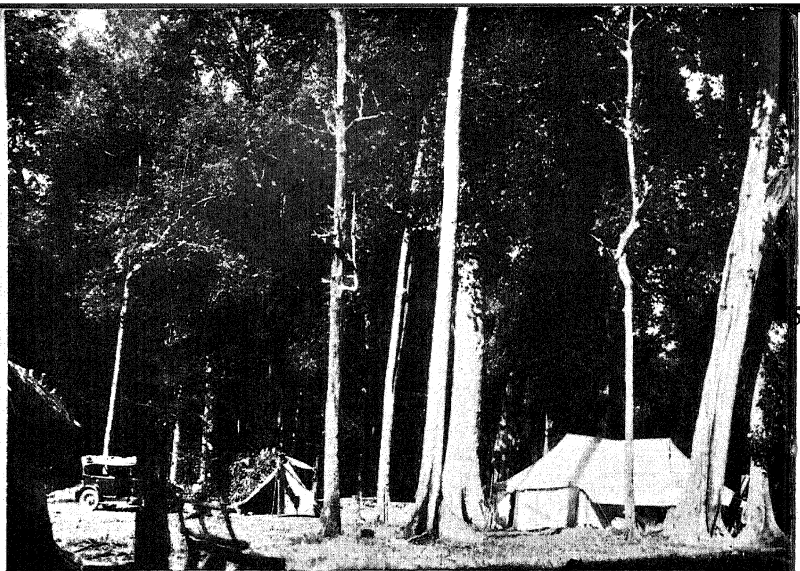
Labi, Dibru's Cousin

Kelomé, Queen of the Akas, and Princesses



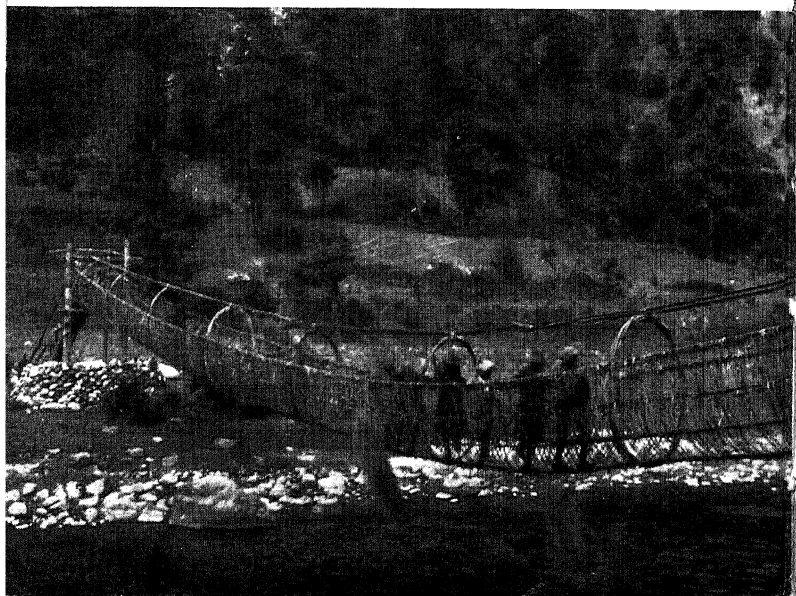
Billi, an Aka King (and murderer)





Camp in the Forest

Cane Bridge, Rupa





very long he was hoarsely whispering his need for something to cure a bad head. I gave him four aspirins of which he swallowed two, saying he would keep the rest for later. Afterwards, wherever we met Wangya his first request was always for an aspirin.

When the audience (I can think of no better word) was over, the kings invited us to a tour of their village. By this time Wangya had become affectionate, ready to embrace us as his loved ones. We avoided the embrace, but he clasped my husband's hand and held on to it while the two of them walked hand-in-hand towards the royal ponies. It was impressive to see the way Wangya gathered up his robes and flung himself into his saddle, sitting there very erect, though occasionally jerked by hiccups.

Ponies had been brought for us to ride as it is considered unseemly for anyone, except the lowest grades, to travel on foot in that country. I have never learned to ride, and would have been far happier walking, but felt that I would lose face and disappoint the kings if I refused to use the pony they had provided. So I let myself be lifted into the saddle, where I clung on desperately, trying to look as if I liked it. After a while I began to enjoy myself, finding myself feeling ridiculously superior as the pony bumped along, bearing me high above the crowd. After all, it *was* a proud moment when I realized in a kind of trance that we were riding in a royal procession, headed by seven kings.

Before we reached the village we came to a small temple, built in the Tibetan manner of stonework with doors and windows of cypress wood. As Liz and Tim were with us we asked Ah Chung if somebody could take charge of the dogs while we went inside and explored the temple. Ah Chung replied that there was no reason why the dogs should not go with us; his smile told us his opinion of the local attitude towards sacred buildings. As far as the kings cared, we might have taken in the ponies and the yak, as well as the dogs.

As soon as we moved out of the sunlight into the dimness of the temple we realized how far the religious practices of Sherchokpas and Sherduppens had degenerated. The middle of the temple was occupied by an enormous prayer-wheel, eight or nine feet high and about three feet in diameter. It was a beautiful thing, painted dull red and decorated with bands of lettering in blue and green and gold, spelling out in Tibetan characters *Om Mani Padmi Hung*. It had been built to revolve round a pole that passed through its centre down through a hole in the floor above the bed of a stream whose waters had once played upon the 'pro-pellers' of the pole, keeping the prayer-wheel always turning. But

the stream had dried up long ago, and the great prayer-wheel hung motionless in the darkness of the temple.

The inside walls of the temple were faced with planks of cypress wood, a warm brown in colour, and furnished with niches to hold the sacred books. Tibetan books are hand printed by wooden blocks on strips of hand-made paper, each strip, or page, measuring about eighteen inches long by three inches wide. The paper is coarse and almost grey in colour and, in these parts, anyway, is made from the bark of the Daphne tree—*Daphne papyriaceae*. Later, when we were travelling in another part of the Momba country, we watched a lama making this paper, and I guessed that the process and the paper were probably the same as the first paper that was ever produced—more than two thousand years ago.

As far as is known, paper making, as distinct from papyrus, was first invented by the Chinese as far back as the second century B.C. It seems more than probable that the art was introduced into Tibet from China, and that the process has remained unchanged since then. The lama who made the paper (in the Momba country) boiled the Daphne bark with wood-ash and then poured the mixture into water which became milky and thickened like thin paste. After stirring it well, the lama dipped wooden-framed sieves into the mixture and shook them about until a pulpy residue was spread evenly over the sieve. He then stood his sieves up to dry in the sun, and afterwards peeled off sheets of coarse, fibrous paper.

Tibetan books are not bound in the usual way, as we know it. Each hand-printed page is laid one on top of another until the chapter or volume is complete. The loose pages are wrapped in material, frequently coloured satin brocade, and the wrapped pages are placed between two boards which are tied round with tapes. I have among my treasures a beautiful example of this which was given to me by Sir Basil Gould, for many years Political Officer in Sikkim. He wrote his own account of the enthronement of the present Dalai Lama (at which wonderful ceremony he was present) and had it translated into Tibetan, and printed as a Tibetan book.

I once showed this treasure to a friend whose taste I had regarded as impeccable; but when the friend asked with a worried look if I intended using the orange satin swathing as a 'head-scarf, or what?' my opinion of his good taste plunged to a depth from which it has never fully risen. I feel that he might one day suggest my using my silver prayer-wheel with its jade orna-

ment as an egg whisk; or my Aka bracelets as pastry cutters.

After looking at the great prayer-wheel in the Rupa temple, the first thing we noticed was that none of the religious books was complete. They had all been opened and many of the pages and bindings lay tattered and scattered on the floor. One or two lamas were moving about wearing correct lamaic robes of dark red woollen stuff. They appeared unconcerned by the neglected state of their temple. One old man with a saintly face was reading the scriptures, going on and on, monotonously spelling out the words. We knew that he did not understand one word of what he read, that he had been taught in a Tibetan monastery where it is a common thing for lamas to learn how to spell out the Tibetan characters without learning to relate them in any way to their spoken language. After all, what does it matter if you cannot understand a word of what you read as long as you utter sounds that are pleasing to the enlightened ones? You, yourself, will be reborn, and born again until you attain enlightenment which will reveal the ultimate meaning of everything.

In Rupa the mechanical aspect of Lamaism was strikingly apparent; it was only the outward symbols that mattered.

Sometimes the country was visited by earnest lamas from Tibet, but on the whole the people were free of the oppression of the monasteries. Doubtless they had to pay money and respect to Tawang, the nearest monastery beyond the Se-La Pass, but religion had little meaning for the people. Probably they paid money to have prayers printed on the strips of cotton that adorned the prayer-masts—such things had to be done by skilled lamas, and lamas do not work for nothing. But as long as the prayer-flags fluttered in the breeze it did not matter that prayer-wheels no longer turned above the dried-up streams, nor did it matter that the temple was falling into ruins, the scriptures lying scattered on the floor. The temple was still there, and the prayer-wheels and the *mendungs* and the *chortens*—outward symbols of a forgotten faith, or of a faith which had perhaps been grafted on to more primitive beliefs, such as the animism still prevailing among the Akas, only eight miles east of Rupa.

It seemed likely that the casual Buddhism of Rupa went no further than a recognition of the power of symbols to keep away the evil spirits that beset the Akas and the Daflas. We felt that, just as the Akas were a link between the primitive Daflas and the first stages of a higher culture, so the Sherchokpas and the Sherdukpens represented a link between the Akas and the medieval civilization of Tibet. It was as though we had watched

history develop from the days of the ancient Britons up to the Platagenets. In Tibet (if we ever got that far) we hoped to see Europe of the Middle Ages—with religion, art and architecture far ahead of anything we saw among the Assam foothills.

The kings had soon bored of our interest in their temple, and when we came out they were seated on their ponies waiting to lead us into the village of Rupa. They took us first to the fort where they offered us refreshment—home-brewed ale, rather like the stuff the Akas had given us, served in silver bowls, and walnuts and chillies.

It was dark inside the fort, small rectangular windows letting in just enough light to help us grope our way up ladder-like stairs from floor to floor. An upper storey was set apart and, in appearance, anyway, devoted to religious ceremonies. It was designed and decorated like the interior of a Tibetan monastery, with murals painted by lamas, beautiful red lacquer boxes, square pillars carved and painted at the top, and altars holding lamps and bowls for offerings.

The lamps were little bowl-like vessels with lighted wicks floating in oil, little pin-points of light flickering in the red-brown darkness of the room. Standing there in that dimly lit interior (with our dogs nosing round, looking for rats) we could not help talking in hushed voices. The place had been designed as a sanctuary dedicated to a faith that is infinitely beautiful when not corrupted by ignorance, superstition, and the lust for power. Even now, despite Wangya's thick voice and the heavy footfalls of seven kings striding about in rope-soled boots, there clung to the place something of the mysticism of 'holy ground'. The colouring was lovely—dark walls of cypress-wood that glowed like copper where the light caught them, the dull red of lacquer, and splashes of vivid blue and green lit by the gilding so much used in decoration.

We came out again into the sunlight of the village street. By this time every inhabitant was waiting to see us. No European woman had ever been there or in the Aka country before, and I was closely observed by the women who were grouped together standing on a knoll of higher ground.

We saw that some of the women were wearing their hair in long, straight fringes which fell over their faces like thick veils. Wangya told us that this was a fashion imposed upon all young girls until they had reached marriageable age that is about fourteen or fifteen years. After marriage they let their hair grow long, twisting it into a thick and lousy knot on the back of their necks.

Looking at the women, I spotted one who was strikingly

beautiful. Her face was cleaner than was usual, her skin was as smooth as ivory, with small features, her hair was parted above a perfect forehead. We decided to move nearer so as to get a good photograph of her.

We advanced a yard or so—and then recoiled, nearly overpowered by the smell of the ladies. It was noticeable that yet another Tibetan custom prevailed in Rupa, the custom of washing as little as possible—either yourself or your clothes. As time went on we were able to become used to that extraordinarily stuffy smell of unwashed, heavy woollen garments; but the first whiff was stifling.

In the appalling bleakness of Tibet there is good reason for not washing, but in the warmth of Rupa the smell was overwhelming. We were forced to retreat and take the photograph from a safer distance.

A favourite entertainment in this country is the performance of a dance by strolling players such as wander from one end of Tibet to another. The seven kings arranged one of these performances for us whenever we visited their country.

Apart from the band which was the same as that which had accompanied the royal procession, only four actors took part. Two of them were grotesquely disguised by masks with wild-looking wigs and beards made from goats' hair. They wore their garments kilted above ankle-length trousers, with sashes tied round their waists and falling down in front. Each carried a small flag in one hand. The other two actors, one of whom looked like a girl, wore hats trimmed with fluted coloured paper, long full skirts, fringed sashes and scarves, and a number of necklaces and charm-boxes.

The dancing consisted of stiff, jerky gestures, bowing and shaking of heads, and hopping about like birds. Before each dance (apparently there were several different dances, but they all looked the same to us) one of the actors emitted a low moaning sound, and the little flags were twirled and shaken before the bowing and hopping began again.

The kings and the villagers were content to watch the show for hours on end, but we usually found that half an hour was enough. At the same time we never lost the thrill of seeing these dancers when we had the chance.

But there was much else to be seen and done in Rupa, and farther up the valley where the village of Shergaon lay among the gently sloping hills. The climate of this valley was far drier than on the southern face of the mountains, and the vegetation belonged to temperate forests.

There was a tremendous wealth of valuable timber among the forests, but the people were unaware of any urge to develop their country. They still knew only one way of clearing ground for cultivation, and that was the most destructive way in the world—the method adopted by all the primitive tribes in Assam, who burn down the forests, doing nothing to replace the timber. In the valleys of Rupa and Shergaon reafforestation had never been heard of, and the people laughed at the suggestion that a day must come when their hills will be barer than the alpine meadows below the snow-line.

Whether their forests could ever be properly 'worked' is doubtful. Certainly not without great expense, and not for a very long time—time enough for them to destroy their forests utterly. Felled timber *could* be floated down the Tenga River and then down to the plains by way of the Borelli, though nobody seems to know where the Tenga joins the larger river. But long before you could get the people interested in such an enterprise the whole tribe is likely to have died out—or to have migrated in search of easier living.

As it is, they migrate every year to the plains, men, women and children abandoning their homes and fields at the beginning of the winter, and moving into camp where they trade chillies, walnuts, wild honey and yak-tails in exchange for rice, which does not grow in their own country. The lovely fertile country where they live seems wasted on a people too indolent to improve their scratchy way of living.

We explored their hills and valleys whenever we had the chance, and it seemed to need little to make the place a prosperous paradise for simple people.

My husband called the kings together and told them of the wealth of the Kulu Valley far away to the west, north of the Punjab. He told them how the orchards of the Kulu Valley grow apples, pears and cherries for export to all parts of India. He pointed out that conditions in the Rupa Valley were ideal for growing fruit, that the plains of Assam and Bengal would provide ready markets.

The kings nodded their heads and said, "Oh" and "Ah". They talked together and seemed keen on the idea. So we promised to come back and to bring with us the young trees that were to be the beginnings of their orchards.

Looking at the sparse fields of wheat and the slatternly poverty of the village, we thought proudly of the day when the orchards of Rupa and Shergaon would bring prosperity to the land.

## *'Monsoon Conditions Prevail'*

OF all the countries where we were able to travel along the northern frontiers of Assam I think perhaps the Momba country of the Sherdukpens and the Sherchokpas fascinated us most, possibly because of its strong affinity with Tibet; possibly, too, because it was easily accessible, and because the various routes we followed to get there were all so beautiful and varied.

We should dearly have liked to have been able to explore deeper into the more primitive countries of the Daflas and the Akas—still more into the Apatanang country which extends right up to the snows, and of which, at that time, nothing was known at all. But to go any distance into those hills involved taking an armed guard, probably quite unnecessary but insisted upon by the Government under which we served. The hill Daflas were said to be difficult and hostile people. We knew they held life cheap, but so far we had had no trouble with them, even when we journeyed into their hills—which took us through much the same sort of forests and mountains as those which lay between Rupa and the plains.

In the country round Rupa we were free to go anywhere we liked, short of crossing the Tibetan frontier, several marches farther to the north.

We found the valley at Shergaon so lovely that we wished we could have stayed there indefinitely; but already our newspapers were reporting that in Rangoon "monsoon conditions prevailed". We used to read those words with glee when we were sweltering in the heavy heat down below—the airless, saturated, devitalizing heat that comes before the monsoon breaks.

While we were on our travels in the hills our letters and papers

reached us every three or four days, carried by relays of messengers. Sitting by a stream in a quiet glen near Rupa we read our mail and saw in the papers that the monsoon had reached Rangoon—which meant that before long it would reach Assam.

In those mild, dry summery days in the Rupa Valley it was hard to imagine the airless heat now holding the plains in suffocating suspense, waiting for the rain to fall from a sky that pressed downwards, sagging with unshed moisture. The rain would come, driving up from the Bay of Bengal, breaking like a cloudburst on Assam. But it would not come to the inner valleys where Rupa lay, the valleys lying sheltered and protected by the high mass of the foothills which broke the fury of the monsoon.

One day's journey would take us over the pass that was known as the Piri-La. The word 'La' being Tibetan for a pass, the word 'Piri' is likely also to be Tibetan, or at any rate derived from Tibetan. It may mean 'frost', a likely name since the pass so often shows itself white with frost above the lower hills. Beyond the pass we would meet the great clouds, as yet too high to unload their moisture on the plains but not too high to drench the mountain forests in heavy mist and rain. If the monsoon broke before our journey's end we might find ourselves cut off by swollen rivers. Our stores were planned to last us only till we got home, and any unforeseen delay might be serious. So we had to move away from Rupa, climbing slowly upwards to the Piri-La.

When we reached the pass we found ourselves on a knife-edged ridge nearly ten thousand feet high—a ridge that rose like a wall dividing the gentle sloping hills and open woodlands of the northern valleys from the rain-drenched, mist-swathed gloom of the southern slopes.

We turned when we reached the pass to take a last look at the vale of Rupa four thousand feet below. We found ourselves looking right across the valleys and the farther hills, beyond the farthest ridges to the north.

What we saw there took away our breath in a gasp, like the shuddering gasp when one plunges into snow, or icy water. For we were looking upon the snows and rocks and glaciers of the Se-La range of the Himalayas, the same snowy range which, from the plains so far below, I had likened to the white crests of waves rising above the forested foothills.

The name 'Se-La' seems to mean 'The Pass of Wild Roses'. But there was nothing among the welter of rock and snow to suggest the presence of wild roses. At sixteen thousand feet there would be nothing growing except the hardiest of alpine plants,



and from all that we could see the Se-La looked as bleak as the Antarctic, utterly remote from the life of growing things.

From east to west for nearly a thousand miles I have seen most of the famous views of the Himalayas, but I know of no *range* more lovely than the Se-La range. Three great peaks, each over twenty thousand feet high, rise in solitary perfection, like goddesses enthroned above the long snow-covered ranges that go on and on, east and west as far as the eye can see—eastwards towards the mass of giant peaks that rise beyond the Tsang-po gorge, westwards to Chumolhari and the Kanchenjunga range.

The three peaks that rise in lonely beauty from the centre of the range are named Kandu, Chumo and Nyegi-Kangsang. The names are undoubtedly of Tibetan origin, but as we learnt them from our Dafla friends the pronunciation was a bit distorted. A likely translation might be:

‘Snowy Mass’ for Kandu, which is a great dome-shaped mountain, its curved outline unbroken, its southern face etched with a scalloped line where (as we could plainly see from the Piri-La) vast cliffs dip from snowfield to snowfield.

‘Venerable Lady’ is most probably the meaning of ‘Chumo’, a name that is repeated in the title of ‘Chumolhari’, the isolated peak that rises above the Phari Plain in Tibet.

But the loveliest of the three peaks of the Se-La range is Nyegi Kangsang, whose name most likely means ‘Snow Country of Delight’.

Seeing the peaks so near to us came like a revelation. We sat down on a lichen-covered rock, almost worshipping the wonder of the snows. It was hard to realize that those who most often crossed the pass—Akas, Sherdukpens and Sherchokpas—could look up to the great snow range with less emotion than a Briton feels on sighting the cliffs of Dover after a journey to the Continent.

To the people of that country the sight of the great Himalayas was mostly hailed as a landmark speaking to them of the nearness of their homeland. They seemed to be unawakened to any idea of beauty in the mountains or the forests. Yet, one might think, the germ of such an idea *was* present—seen in the age-old custom of naming the mountains after gods and goddesses, or of crediting trees, rocks or cliffs with harbouring spirits, good or evil. That which was beyond their reach, vast, remote and unattainable, inspired them with awe and wonder; and from their awe of the unknown originated legends which had become a part of their religion. May not such awe and wonder be the first dim groping towards a recognition of beauty that has yet to evolve among these people?

Our own worship of the sheer beauty of the mountains awoke again our craving to turn back to Rupa and to go on and over the hills; over the Se-La, the Pass of Wild Roses where the snow and the black rocks looked so near to us from the top of the Piri-La. Only a few more days of travel would have taken us there—and just beyond that snow-swept pass lay Tibet, where we longed to go. It looked so easy, and it would have been easy then; easy enough if the way had not been tied up by formalities, Government inhibitions, and the need for permits which we could not get. All that we got (some months later) was a courteous invitation from some lamas to visit them in Tawang, the monastery not far beyond the pass.

We were not allowed to accept the invitation.

But we were finding it cold on the top of the Piri-La—almost as cold, we felt, as it must be away over there on the other pass where, at sixteen thousand feet, the snow drifts never melted, where our thoughts had carried us to rest among the jagged black rocks so clearly seen from where we were.

Chilled to the bone, we were reminded now of the rain driving up from the south, dissolving in mist that came drifting among the hemlocks that bent against the wind among the rocks and scrub of the Piri-La. The mists were driving across the hill-tops, drifting like ghosts between ourselves and the shining beauty of the Se-La range. We pulled ourselves up and turned to follow the track that wound downwards, losing itself from sight among the rain-soaked forests of the southern slopes.

The hill-people often did the journey from their own valleys to the plains in one day but we preferred to move more leisurely, giving our laden porters a decent rest between marches that were seldom more than ten or twelve miles. We had a favourite camping place in a ravine about one thousand feet below the Piri-La. I'm not quite sure why we were so devoted to that camp; it was beautiful, certainly, and there were no insects there, though plenty of leeches—but nearly always it rained while we were there. Because of the rain we could seldom get a fire to burn, so that everything got sodden and mouldy, and miserably cold. The tent became wet in every fibre of its canvas which sagged down and inwards, sometimes letting drops like big tears fall on our beds, always leaning against us, cold and wet whenever we stood up or came near the flaps. The ground-sheet became foul with cold, black mud, and, for our comfort, the porters liked to build a little living-room of four posts supporting a thatched roof, where we could feed and live with more convenience than in the

muddy alley between two camp beds in the sodden tent.

When we left the Piri-La we were looking forward to the cheery sight of our camp in the ravine. We were able to picture the tent, a triangle of white, looking tiny yet homelike among the enormous trees and the wilderness of fern and rock. We were hoping for nice dry weather with a bright fire of logs burning in the glen when darkness fell.

Slipping and plunging down the track, we kept on hoping, while footfalls were muted in the white mist through which the forest loomed ghostly and infinitely mournful.

At this height the trees and ferns and lichen-covered rocks—the whole forest—seemed to belong to another and far older world than the tangled jungle forests of the Borelli Gorge. Down there, eight thousand feet below, the forests were breeding new life continually; creepers, vines and lianas climbing and swarming over everything, veiling the trees in such thick mantles of greenery that there were places that looked like gardens abandoned to a madness of topiary work. Creepers blanketed the undergrowth, dragged themselves upwards like scarves, spread themselves over trees, choking everything under a curtain of epiphytic green. There was violence in the choking, struggling life of those jungle forests, the violence of young life fighting for existence in a tangled, struggling wilderness.

But up here, near the top of the mountains, there was silence and stillness as though everything had been old for thousands of years. The mists, not yet turned to rain, moved and drifted silently, sometimes parting to reveal the indescribable savagery of a forest almost frightening in its vastness and its age.

The feeling of age and of decay was stressed by the knowledge that the forest was of a type which lives upon its own decay. Rotted timber, fallen leaves, and mouldering ferns and moss gave to the ancient trees life which spawned the rot on which they fed.

There were mosses, ferns and lichens whose primitive structure had remained unchanged through thousands of years. There were hoary rocks humped among the undergrowth, the rocks that once had lain below the Sea of Tethys—rocks so old that even the ancient forests, compared with them, were young as seedlings newly sprung amongst the mosses and the ferns.

Here and there among the trees looming out of the mist blood-red masses of rhododendron blazed incongruously, and magnolias scented the air, their blossom shining like stars among the greys and greens of the forest. The oak trees here were tremendous, desperately old—almost unrecognizable, covered in

moss, and plumed with parasitic ferns. Their vast roots, heavily cushioned in moss, twisted out, sprawling among rotting vegetation on the steep slopes of the mountains. High overhead they flung out huge branches that dripped with moss and lichens hanging in ragged wisps like old, tattered banners.

When we reached our camp that day the mists had turned to rain that wailed among the trees clinging to the mountains. The porters had tried to brighten the scene for us by decorating the rustic living-room with rhododendrons, massing them everywhere until the place looked like a bridal bower. Our old cook was already crouching over a smoky fire in his lean-to cookhouse, coaxing a kettle to boil for tea. For the moment we felt glad of the rain as, on our outward journey, he had set fire to his cookhouse half an hour after reaching camp on a ridge that was so narrow that we had all, porters, servants and ourselves, had to sleep in banana-leaf shelters built end to end like barracks. I don't know why that whole camp did not go up in flames when the cookhouse went on fire. Within seconds the dry banana leaves had curled up and burnt to ashes, the bamboo framework exploding like guns while the blaze was at its merriest. 'Merry' was the right word to describe such accidents as brought the Nepali porters running to enjoy the fun of saving the camp from destruction.

There was merriment again that wet night in the ravine when a huge rain-rotted branch came crashing down, falling uncomfortably near to the porters' shelters. We heard the crash, followed by shouts and laughter from the men as they dashed out into the rain to move the broken branch from the pathway.

There were letters and papers waiting for us in our tent, amongst them a note from the office warning us that the rivers had risen so high that we might have difficulty in crossing them. Hoping that the rain might stop, we decided to spend two nights at the camp in the ravine, so giving the rivers a chance to subside.

With no camp fire to warm us it was so cold that we had to go to bed, both the dogs already having chosen to do so. From time to time throughout the day Liz would get up and go out as far as the living-room or the cookhouse, but Tim refused to move. He remained in the tent from the hour of arrival at the camp until the tent was pulled down forty-eight hours later, emerging only once—to be sick on a rock just a yard outside the tent. We wondered if he was collecting material for a book of memoirs—the sort of book that would be rather dull, with a name like *Forty-eight Hours in a Tent*.

The camp in the ravine was a halting place for the Akas on their journeys to and from the plains. Some of them passed through while we were there, and they, too, reported on the swollen state of the rivers. Their thin cotton garments were wet through, but they were cheery—untroubled by the rain. We envied them as they moved on, vanishing into the forest on their way to the sunny lands beyond the pass. All the same, I should have hated at that moment to have had to move out of the clammy tent into the forests that were now sobbing with rain.

It rained all that night and all next day, and most of the following night. Sometimes the rain fell softly, swathing the trees in mist so that they stood up ghostly and gigantic, infinitely old and weary, draped with ferns and ragged moss that dripped despairingly. Sometimes the rain came blinding down, drowning the voices of streamlets that twisted their ways amongst the trees, or brawled and foamed over rocks and boulders. Often the rain came with thunder rolling up from the unseen plains, echoing amongst the mountains, and passing in sulky rumbles far beyond our narrow glen.

In all our visits to that camp we seldom knew it under a clear sky, but it was utterly lovely when we did—silent and cold, with a huge fire of logs blazing outside the tent, and more fires outside the porters' shelters, winking and glowing in the darkness. In the narrow strip of sky visible above the trees the stars would shine out bravely until the mists floated up from below, dimming the stars before the advance of another mass of cloud weary with its load of unshed rain.

After a second rain-loud night at the camp we decided that it was futile to wait up there for the weather to clear. We would do better to move down to the river and camp, if necessary, where we could watch for and seize our best chance of crossing. Before we could reach the river we would have to camp for one night at Pestiferous Camp twelve miles away, four thousand feet below the ravine.

The rain held off for some hours while we were at Pestiferous. We should have been glad of this, remembering that a clear sky would give the rivers a chance to subside. But Pestiferous was a place where rain was the best defence against its innumerable pests—all of them, that is, except the leeches. On that pestilential shelf among the lower forests the finer weather brought out all the *dam-dims*, sandflies, mosquitoes and horse-flies that made the place intolerable. It was hot, too; muggily hot with a heat that steamed like a wash-tub. We left the plague-spot next morning as

early as possible, while the forest was still dark and reasonably cool in the hours before dawn had begun to crack.

By that time it was raining again in a hopeless, steady, roaring deluge that abated never for one moment throughout five hours while we slipped and paddled downwards under the trees along the streaming pathways—and among the leeches that came looping towards us; looping on to our feet where they shrivelled in death at contact with the tobacco-tea which not even five hours of rain could wash away.

As we turned the last bend of the mountain track we could hear the moaning of the river wailing above the ceaseless rain. On the river bank our porters were resting, their loads set down beside them while they waited for us to decide whether and how to cross the river.

Normally, the river here was a shallow stream, easily forded by stepping-stones; but now it had swollen to a furious flood, great muddy waves riding madly along, crushing stones and boulders with an ugly, grinding noise. At first we saw no hope of crossing. Already it was more than waist-deep, dangerously swift, and rising rapidly as we watched. My husband called up the leader, or 'Sirdar', of the porter-corps and discussed the matter with him. The Sirdar, a good friend of ours named Bom Bahadur, advised crossing the stream. He knew how it might be done, and as his men had only enough rations to last them one more day he was rightly against the risk of further delay.

His idea was that he and some of the men should throw a tree-trunk across the river where the branches would catch and hold amongst the rocks, breaking the rush of the waters and serving as a hand-hold for those men who would go into the water, one at a time, holding fast to the tree until they had formed a cordon across the river. When I heard of the plan I began to think almost lovingly of the cane suspension bridge slung high above the river at Rupa.

Soaked to the skin (like everyone else) and shivering in the pouring rain, I shuddered till my teeth chattered at sight of those careering waves riding madly down the river. It was obvious that our porters could not be asked to go hungry in the jungle, waiting for the rain to stop though it looked like raining for days and weeks to come.

I tried to light a cigarette but my matches were saturated in my pocket. One of the porters lit it for me, but the cigarette was too damp to draw and my hands so wet that they turned it into a pulped mess of paper and tobacco. I stood leaning against a

tree with Liz and Tim shivering beside me, watching while a fallen tree was dragged to the banks of the river and thrown across.

My husband and some of the men went into the water to push the tree securely among the rocks. They held on furiously to the branches, their legs nearly swept from under them by the rush of water. Above the voice of the rain and the howling of the river I could hear the porters shouting and my husband's voice carrying above the din.

By this time I was too cold and depressed to feel scared. I was convinced that we would all be drowned, and my only comfort was that at least we should be drowned together. There was no hope of swimming in that flood of raging water; anyway, I can't swim properly. I can only maintain myself in a static condition in a very calm sea.

About a dozen men were now in the river, bracing themselves against the tree and forming a cordon across the river. My husband had come back to help the rest of us to get across. The men carrying the tents were sent over first, each man being helped hand over hand by the men holding on to the tree, and by my husband wading in after them to help from behind. The rain-soaked tents were the heaviest of all the loads, and I watched in horror as the porters moved deeper into the river, their feet slipping alarmingly, their heavy loads half submerged by the swirling, toppling waves.

They reached the farther bank at last, rearranged their streaming loads, and moved off into the rain, hurrying towards the camp site a few hundred yards away.

After the tents it was my turn. My husband came back and told me to climb on his back, bidding the cook hold the dogs till he could return and carry them over. I could not have got any wetter than I was already, yet the first swirl of the water against my legs seemed to be pouring over me like a waterfall.

I knew there was another man there helping my husband to fight the waves while he carried me to safety; I knew we seemed to be ages struggling across the river, and I tried to make feeble jokes with the men holding on to the tree and helping us along. Once I glanced behind and saw Liz and Tim gazing at us pitiously while the old cook squatted on his heels, holding them fast by their collars. I was terrified lest they might break away and try to follow us into the river. Even a dog could not have swum against its fury. Then I turned my head in time to tighten my grip on my husband's shoulder as he dragged himself up out of

the water and on to the bank, where I slid to the ground, and heard him say:

"Don't wait. Go quickly to the tent and get into dry clothes. I'm going back to bring the dogs over—and after that the rest of us."

The dogs. That meant he would have to carry one under each arm, as he had when he carried them over the cane bridge. Or would he have to make two journeys, carrying one dog at a time? He did not stop to answer my questions but flung himself back into the battle with the river. I disobeyed orders at once. How could I go on until the dogs were safely across? Still more, how could I move away until I knew that my husband was safe after helping the last of our party to reach the shore?

So I waited. Waited and watched the two journeys that were needed to bring first Liz and then Tim over to me. And then, with the dogs beside me, I waited and watched for another half-hour while the rescue work went on.

Seeking some sort of shelter from the rain, I made my way to a huge rock, and crouched beneath it trying to comfort and draw comfort from the dogs. Once, in the interval between the river crossings, I turned to look at the rock, and saw that the face of it bore the familiar inscription:

"OM MANI PADMI HUNG."

The words were engraved on the stone in large Tibetan characters. Through the blinding rain I saw like a mirage the sunny vale of Rupa with its *mendungs* and *chortens*, and the seven kings riding in procession. This rock marked the site of their camp headquarters when they migrated in the winter to trade chillies and yak-tails for rice. The rock was a vast boulder, partly embedded in rubble, that must have been left there in the days of the last Ice Age. I placed my hand against the cold face of stone and tried to adjust my sense of proportion, switching my thoughts back across the thousands of years that had passed since ice had gripped the foothills, holding this same boulder fast bound in the massed ice of a glacier. The scorings and scratches of ice were clearly visible on its surface, shining now under the wetness of rain. In some thousands of years to come the action of rain and sun might obliterate the ice-scratches as well as the words so deeply cut in its face. But it was no use trying to be philosophical about rocks as long as I could hear the shouts of those who were still battling with the stream. The old cook had been helped across, and he passed me now, smiling, yet shocked to see me





Jon Godden and the Author with two of the Seven Kings of Rupa



The Seven Kings of Rupa  
*Top left, Wangya, Chief King*



waiting in the rain. He repeated my husband's wish for me to move on and change into dry clothes in the tent.

"And you, too," I told him, looking at his pill-box hat, from which rain was pouring over his face and beard, and his once-white garments clinging to him in transparent wetness.

However, the dogs were miserably wet and cold, so I moved away with them slopping along the muddy path towards the tent.

As soon as I pushed my way into the reeking tent, the bearer came in with a tea-pot, a plate of biscuits and a large black kettle. Already he had changed into dry clothes and was wearing his latest favourite in hats—a discarded sponge-bag that had once belonged to me. He vowed that it had kept his head dry all day long and that he was therefore immune from fever or cold. I have always noticed that Indians seem to love to protect their heads, swathing round them shawls that cover mouths and noses while leaving their poor bodies shivering in cotton garments in the coldest weather. The habit may have its origin in the days when people believed that malaria was caused by the 'foul emanations' of marshy land. Or it is possible that those who protect their heads so carefully may argue that, since it is your head that tells you you feel cold, then as long as your head is muffled you are less likely to know that the weather is bitterly cold and wet; or that your whole body is shivering and aching with fever. At any rate, the bearer in his sponge-bag hat was all right. How he had contrived to coax a fire to burn and water to boil so soon was one of those miracles that our servants seemed able to achieve everywhere—in the most unlikely circumstances. Naturally, it was for their own comfort to do so; they were as much in need of hot food as the rest of us, but that did not make it less wonderful. There were times when I felt like giving them all our stores out of gratitude for their courage and their unflinching care of us in camp.

From somewhere now an orderly appeared with towels, dried the dogs and gave them their food, which they refused to eat until master came in. I heard him yodelling while I was peeling off my wet clothes under the back flap of the tent. He arrived just as I finished dressing. I found the dogs leaping upon him, jumping on to our beds (on which I saw a number of bloated leeches disgorging blood; the river had washed away the last traces of tobacco-tea that had protected us throughout five hours of rain) and finally settling down among our damp bedding after bolting their food.

The last batch of porters had crossed the river and were

shuffling past the tent, dumping their loads and making off for their own quarters where already their friends had got fires to burn and were singing lilting and untranslatable Nepali songs while they cooked their food.

Rather fatuously we told each other that there was no doubt that monsoon conditions prevailed in Assam. It was near the end of May; we must now wait until September before we could again go into the mountains among the Akas or the Sherchokpas and Sherdukpens. For the better part of four months we must swelter in the heat on the edge of the heavy forests of the plains. For most of that time we would seldom see the rolling foothills. Not (unless there was a break in the rains, when the heat would be appalling) until October came could we hope to see the Se-La Range rising like crests of foam above the forests of the lower hills.

## *'Monsolitude'*

I HAVE been trying to find a word which should be the antonym of 'hibernation'. The dictionary mentions 'estivation', but that does not convey the right impression of the saturated heat of Assam during the monsoon; heat that is so devitalizing you feel like dropping asleep at any hour of the day—only it is far too hot for sleep, unless you have been born and bred for generations to that sort of climate.

Indians could do it; it was a gift they had which I have always envied. In the soaking, dripping, sweaty heat of Bengal and Assam, or in the violent, dusty heat and flies of northern India I have seen one great blessing of which no amount of poverty or depression seems able to deprive most Indians. One gets the impression that they are able to sleep anywhere, at any time, in any conditions, in any climate or among any smells, noise, and crowds—totally oblivious of swarms of flies, mosquitoes or cockroaches.

I gave up the idea of 'estivation' as a suitable word to describe our retirement from touring during the monsoon. I decided finally on a portmanteau word—'monsolitude'.

The word came to my mind one day while I looked at a solitary adjutant bird, lean and austere, immensely tall and lonely, the only living thing (and it had about as much life as a statue) in a vast expanse of rice-field and heavy, lowering sky. The luminous green of the rice was barred with lines of silvery blue where flooded fields spread into lakes and channels. The green sea of rice and the silvery bars of water stretched to a far horizon where the leaden monsoon sky dropped like a curtain, drawing a hard, dark line where land and sky seemed to touch each other. Against a backcloth painted in horizontal sweeps of

green and silver and indigo the adjutant bird stood black and motionless as a drawing in pen and ink. I tried to make a crayon sketch of the scene, and I called my picture 'Monsolitude'.

Perhaps it wasn't a very inspired name. So many people have pointed out to me that there is no such word; or (which is worse) have asked me what it meant. I tell them in a flat voice that it means 'Monsoon solitude', and I know that they think it is a stupid name, wrongly spelt. But perhaps those people had never seen an adjutant bird alone and unmoving in a landscape typical of the monsoon in its majesty of colour.

We were not completely solitary during the monsoon; far from it, but our circle of friends was confined mainly to our household, the office staff, the neighbouring villagers, and only those friends who were not cut off by impassable roads and flooded rivers whose bridges were swept away and whose primitive ferries could not be worked against the flood.

We had no bazaar (or market) in our neighbourhood. The nearest shops, except for an army canteen two miles distant, were twenty miles away, mostly cut off during the monsoon when the only road became an impassable morass of mud and floods. But more needful than shops in India is the bazaar, the open market where the household staff go (daily where possible) to browse among the stalls, to meet their friends, to gossip and to bargain, to buy the food on which they make a profit by charging their employers slightly more on each item than the market price.

All of us knew that the domestic staff reckoned to make a steady income on their bazaar accounts. We accepted the fact as part of the expense of being obliged to employ six or seven servants to do the work of one British 'daily'. Only occasionally I had to protest against the soaring profits that gradually mounted up in the cook's account. When I protested, I never scolded. I preferred to express shocked surprise at the way in which *he* was 'being cheated by the rascally thieves' of bazaar merchants. He would shake his beard sadly and agree with me, and for a month or so it would appear that he was patronizing more honest dealers. I knew perfectly well that the dealers had been bargained down to the lowest price by the cook; and the cook knew that I knew. But we respected each other's little deception (better to call it *etiquette*), so that perfect harmony reigned throughout the years we knew each other.

Market day in our district occurred only once a week, on Sundays, at a village four miles away. While we were 'in residence' at our house on the edge of the forest Sunday was the great day

of the week for the domestic staff. Immediately after breakfast they assembled on the veranda, carrying baskets and shopping-bags, packing themselves into our shabby Ford, while my husband got in front with the cook and drove the party off to the bazaar.

During the monsoon, chains had to be fixed round the wheels of the car to enable them to revolve in the porridgy mud of the village lanes. Frequently the passengers had to get out and push, often enlisting the help of an entire village when the car got hopelessly bogged in mud; or when it skidded off the road into waterlogged fields. Those were happy days for the servants, even when they returned with their clean white garments, their faces and their heads spattered and blotched with mud.

We knew it was a day of profit for the cook, but it was some years before we realized the extent of his profitable dealings in the bazaar. On a day (sometime after we had left that district) he came to us and asked for a loan of fifty rupees to complete the sum he needed to buy a car being sold by a friend of ours. He wanted the car for his son who was going to set up as a taxi-driver. We had visions of our future tours following rather different lines than hitherto. We pictured the cook leading the column, driving his own or his son's car, with the bearer following, perhaps, on a motor-bicycle, and then the water-carrier on a push-bike; finally, ourselves, the porters and the dogs—on foot.

Meanwhile the cook built himself a house in our garden, and brought his family to live there. Almost at once a series of crises arose in the cook's family life. First of all, his son (he who was to become a taxi-driver) ran away with a girl from the 'coolies' quarters. The cook went weeping to my husband, shattered by the disgrace. He brightened up later when it was pointed out to him that boys will be boys, and in time the son abandoned his Nepali wench and made a suitable marriage.

Far worse was the crisis when the cook's daughter eloped with our washerman. On the day when that happened I had already had a nasty shock from a wild cat that had produced kittens in the thatch of our roof. I had gone into the drawing-room and was met by a kitten falling down the chimney and bolting out of the room. It was followed by five more kittens (there seemed to be hundreds of them, pouring like soot down the chimney) and finally Mamma who hustled her family out of sight. The chimney, the only one in the house, did not go up to the roof. It simply opened into an iron spout which pierced the wall and stuck out at the back of the house like the mouth of a cannon. The kittens had probably been nesting there for some

weeks, and I was still thanking Heaven that it was not one of those days when a fire had been lit to dry the room, when the cook rushed in. He was sobbing convulsively.

My husband came in while I was trying to understand the trouble, so I retired. Almost before I had heard the story myself our whole district knew that the cook's daughter had bolted with the washerman—a man of low degree.

The cook demanded that an armed guard, a posse of police, and my husband himself should go out at once, arrest the washerman and bring the daughter home. It was hard to convince the angry father that this could not be done. For a day or two the elopement ousted all other business. It was talked of in the office where even the Daflas abandoned their quarrels and their law-suits in favour of juicier gossip. All our servants went about with grave faces, speaking in hushed voices. Then the cook's flair for business asserted itself.

He told us that, at the time of her elopement, his daughter had been wearing a quantity of jewellery. This meant that, although there was no law to prevent the washerman from stealing the girl he had no legal right to the family jewels. The washerman was a thief and must be arrested at once.

A search party was sent out (they did not have to go very far) and the sinners were brought back. The girl was restored to her family, and her lover was placed in the guard-house 'pending investigations'. For the washerman this was fortune. Apart from the interest of finding himself the talk of the town, he was able to live in comfortable idleness at Government expense, exchanging bawdy stories with his Nepali guards.

I think he enjoyed life still more when the cook came and reviled him. Standing outside the guard-house, he explained to the washerman everything he thought and knew about the misbegotten forebears of the prisoner, enumerating biological and obstetric details which would have brought a blush to the cheeks of Freud.

Sitting on the veranda, the dogs and I heard the cook reviling the washerman. He kept it up for four hours and he never repeated himself once. Nor, throughout those four hours, did he pause for one moment; not even to listen to the washerman's counterblast which could be heard bawled from inside the guard-house walls.

Towards evening the cook came back to roast the usual fowl for our dinner. He looked refreshed and happier, strengthened in mind and body. We felt sorry for his daughter. In time, however,



she was suitably married—suitably, at any rate, from her father's point of view. I don't suppose the girl was allowed any say in the matter. The washerman was released and advised to seek work elsewhere. We were sorry about this as he was a good washerman, but there was no more room for both him and the cook in our family circle.

Towards the end of the monsoon we began looking for the 'cold-weather grasses'—beautiful silver-tufted grasses that were always the first signs of the cooler weather to come. I have seen these grasses growing on river banks and flats so thickly that they looked like a silver sea, the breeze lightly rippling through feathery tops that waved four feet above the ground.

One evening I went out with the dogs to look for the silver grasses that might be showing on the banks of a stream near our house. The weather was still uncomfortably hot, but there had been no rain for a week, and my husband had been able to drive off to the forest office, twenty miles away.

Any day now we might see again some of our friends from beyond the hills. The rivers were falling, and we were hoping to go back to the Aka country in late September—to Jamiri and to Rupa where we must take the young fruit trees that were to be the beginning of the Rupa orchards.

When I reached the wooden bridge across the stream near our house I saw a man fishing from the bank. His face was familiar to me. His dirty cotton garments made me suppose him to be a villager, perhaps a Daffa, though he wore no cane hat, and his thick hair was not dressed in the Daffa style. I called to him, asking if he had caught any fish. He grinned and showed me a repulsive-looking mud-fish. I asked him where his village was. He pointed to the hills.

"A Daffa?" I asked.

"A rajah," he replied, and I realized that I was addressing one of the seven kings of Rupa, the one we had liked the best—the handsomest and the most intelligent. I tried to ask him if the other kings had also come down from Rupa, but conversation was difficult as both the king and I could speak only a very few words of Assamese. I went up and admired his fish, and he greeted the dogs like old friends. We smiled at each other, nodded and gesticulated. Then I left him to his fishing and went on along the forest road where the track was being cleared of grass and weeds that had choked it during the monsoon.

On either side of the grassy track the forest rose like a wall, impenetrable in its tangle of creepers and thorny canes above

which the trees rose, massed together, here and there some forest giant rising high above the density of the jungle.

Sometimes there were clearings where the trees rose out of dark pools of water, and here I saw the silver grasses shining against the green depths of the forest.

Here, also, I heard monkeys chattering in the hidden roof of the forest, and Liz and Tim dashed into the undergrowth to chase them. People had warned us that it was dangerous to allow the dogs to chase monkeys. They had told us tales of how whole troops of monkeys would come down and set upon dogs, overpowering and killing them. Whether such things ever really happen I cannot say. We never knew a first-hand account of such a tragedy, and our own experience seemed to prove that it was unlikely. On three occasions we knew Liz to kill a monkey (not Tim; as a gun-dog he abjured such game, though he enjoyed the chase) and on each of those times the rest of the tribe made off, swarming to the tree-tops as fast as they could.

Once, in low scrub jungle where there were no tall trees, the monkeys threatened to attack but they were easily driven off when we yelled at them and threatened them with umbrellas.

That evening, however, when I went alone with the dogs up the forest road, there came a moment when I thought we were in for serious trouble. I had noticed that the monkeys being chased were langurs, the large, long-tailed animals that hardly ever came down to the ground. From where I stood on the road I could see them flying through the tree-tops. I stood watching them, fascinated, as I always was, by their marvellous flying leaps. They seemed to be borne along on invisible wings as they passed from tree to tree, their beautiful limbs stretched out, hands clutching the frailest of twigs that broke in their grasp just as they leaped onwards seizing another handhold.

They were lovely animals both in form and movement—big creatures with silver-grey hair and black faces. I could have watched them for hours in their magnificent flight. But at that moment I heard a thud.

Enthralled as I was, watching the langurs, I might not have heeded the thud if it had not been followed at once by a terrifying clamour from the monkeys and hysterical barking from the dogs. The clamour and the barking, and the chattering and the screaming became so loud that a hideous possibility came to my mind. Because of the thickness of the jungle I could not see the dogs, but it seemed probable that the thud which I had heard might have been the sound of a langur leaping down, followed perhaps by all his tribe.

I yelled to Liz and Tim but knew there was little hope of calling them back—no hope at all if they were now being attacked by a mob of infuriated langurs. The idea made me desperate. I crashed into the forest, tearing myself on thorns and fighting my way through creepers that coiled like ropes from tree to tree. I hadn't the remotest idea how to deal with the situation I expected to find. I knew only that I had to do something; anything rather than stand still waiting for the dogs to be destroyed.

Battling my way through thorny creepers, I was aware that the monkey voices were diminishing, their chattering yells passing away somewhere among the massed green far above me. I broke through a tangle of undergrowth and found myself in a small open space. I was still yelling to the dogs but apart from the sound of my own voice, I seemed to be enclosed in a silence that was eerie after the recent din.

On the ground in front of me a magnificent langur lay on its back with its long arms twisted round the neck of Liz.

The bull terrier's teeth were sunk into a deep wound in the langur's throat, and Tim was standing by, half afraid to move. I guessed that the langur must be mortally wounded, though the strength of its hold on Liz made me wonder. Not a sound came from the poor beast's throat, but its eyes were open and it looked so beautiful and so tragic that I found myself hating Liz, detesting the lusty courage that sends bull terriers rushing in to kill; as they have been bred to do for generations.

With a warning word to Tim I went up and grabbed Liz by the collar, cursing and raging as I pulled her off her victim. As soon as I dragged at the dog, the langur's hands loosed their hold and, placing them on the ground, he levered himself into a crouching position.

For a second I stood there holding Liz, wondering what I should do if there were yet life enough in the monkey to enable him to attack. He was a large animal, larger than Liz, and I have no idea how I could have dealt with him.

Mainly I longed for means to put him out of his pain. His wounded throat, and the utter silence that held us there in the forest, sickened me at the thought that such a lovely animal must suffer in loneliness while his tribe soared from branch to branch miles away across the forest.

I waited helplessly and watched him as he moved away, slowly creeping out of sight into the darkness of the undergrowth. I think he was dying, and I hope he died soon.

I was far too upset at the moment to wonder at the rarity that

I had seen—a langur having missed its hold, an accident that I have never seen or heard of since. Whether its back was broken when it fell, or whether it was injured in any way, seems unlikely. Animals so astoundingly agile should be able to drop from almost any height, but Liz must have jumped upon it as it fell, and with the fighting science of her breed bitten it through the throat at once.

By this time she was exhausted and subdued, Tim was exhausted and awed, I was exhausted and irritable. Also, I was torn and scratched by thorns, saddened and angry at the tragedy of the langur. It was only one of a million jungle tragedies, but we loved the jungle and its animals. At that moment I felt horribly alone; isolated from the things we loved—cut off because our love of the wilderness had so little in common with the law of the jungle. Even the dogs seemed withdrawn from me. Hundreds of square miles of jungle and forest lay between us and the friendly valleys beyond the hills.

The hot silence of the forest pressed against me like a malignant presence (the Dafflas could have given it a name) obscuring its beauty under the force of evil.

Four months ago, sheltering in the rain under the 'Om Mani' rock by the flooded river, I had tried to see things in perspective, trying to philosophize about the age of the rocks.

Walking back through the forest that evening I tried to do the same, switching my thoughts down through long corridors of time, trying to grasp the immensity of ages gone long before the first mosses grew among the debris left in these valleys after the last Ice Age. The coal-measure forests, flourishing about two hundred million years ago, must, I thought, have looked something like these forests where I walked. There were no flowers or grass in those long-buried forests, not many insects (which must have been a blessing)—the only animals were great clumsy things that splashed and lumbered through the swampy undergrowth.

But here among the trees, growing in a swampy tangle of vegetation, fallen timber and decay, there were ferns and palms and cycads, hardly changed at all, persisting in their type throughout the infinite changes of nearly two hundred million years; surviving somehow to seed and grow again among the forests that now grew upon the ancient rocks of Tethys. Everything choking in the struggle to survive, animals and insects and swarming vegetation preying on one another, propagating and destroying life, piling up decay from the rotted substance from which life must spring again.

I thought of the snow mountains, which we had not seen since that day when we had looked across at them from the top of the Piri-La. We would be seeing them again soon; those flawless peaks would still be piercing the sky, inviolate in their serenity, remote in their icy solitude far above the struggle for life among men and animals and green growing things.

And then I saw more silver grasses, their feathery tips gleaming like snow in the evening dusk of the forest. The sight of the grasses made me glad again; glad because of their beauty and because they spoke of the end of ‘Monsolitude’—the monstrous solitude of the jungle spawning and choking throughout the long heat of the monsoon.

## *Frustrated Journey*

THE forest was looking its loveliest when in September we moved through it on our way back to the hills. It was still hot and muggy on the plains; all the better reason to get away as soon as possible to the clearer air of the Tenga valley. We were repeating our tours of the previous year—but making first for Rupa to hand over the young fruit trees that were to start the orchards in those hills.

On our first day's march, starting at four in the morning to avoid the worst heat of the day, the porters made a mistake and did a double march, striding ahead of us so that we soon lost sight of them, and feared they might have taken a wrong turning in the uncut, grass-grown paths.

After the fourth mile I developed a blister on my heel (I usually did, until I invented a blister-proof type of shoe) which became raw almost at once. For a time I limped along in agony; then I removed shoes and stockings and walked the rest of the twenty-mile journey barefoot, whenever possible paddling in the shallow waters of the river.

But it was an uneasy journey for all of us. When we saw no sign of our porters at the tenth mile, where we had hoped to camp, we saw ourselves having to sleep somewhere in the jungle without tents or beds or food. Even the dogs were tired when at last we reached that part of the valley where in May we had had such trouble in crossing the river.

It was a glad sight to see the camp fire blazing in the dusk. Our table was set near it, laid for supper. And as we approached, Moniram, the Daffa boy, appeared with the dogs' dinner ready in their own dishes.

I dressed and bandaged my blistered heel, giving my shoes to Moniram with instructions to split them up the back, and to dig at them with a razor blade or a knife until there was nothing left to cause more blisters.

My husband declares that he has never known me to buy a pair of shoes without 'getting busy on them' with a razor blade within a few hours of first trying to wear them. He is probably right. But he never gets blisters, corns, callouses or bunions. He can walk into a shop and buy a pair of shoes that look about as comfortable as a gas stove, walk out in them straight away and continue to walk for ten miles or more without ever experiencing the torture that most of us know too well.

Meanwhile Moniram performed a miracle with my shoes and I moved easily over the ten miles up to Pestiferous Camp the next morning. Climbing up to the camp through the forests was a very different journey from our last experience when the rain had come pouring down, soaking through the trees, flooding the streams and rivers. We could rejoice now as every step took us higher into the hills. Half a mile before we reached the camp we could hear the porters singing as they chopped wood and erected their shelters and the tents.

Everything seemed set fair for the next three weeks; not only fair, but roseate red when we saw the rich discovery made by one of the porters.

As we neared the narrow ridge where the camp was built under the oak trees, one of the porters came towards us carrying something which, at first sight, looked like some strange marine creature. So strange was the treasure, and so awful its smell, like something that had been dead too long, that the dogs put up their hackles and growled menacingly.

We thought we had already identified all the noisome pests of Pestiferous Camp but the sight and smell of this monstrous exhibit was something new—the sight of it was new, anyway; not the smell. The thing might have been a starfish with dropsy but we knew that was impossible; quite impossible, unless it was some sort of adaptation of something that had once moved among the rocks of Tethys.

I shrank back, thinking it might be a vast and bloated spider with small-pox; or it might have been something bred by an octopus from a spotted toadstool. I was as suspicious as the dogs—like them, recoiling fearfully from the unknown. But my husband let out a yell of joy as he examined the thing at close quarters. He knew it for what it was—a blossom that had been discovered

a hundred years before, of which no specimen had since been found. Its name was *Sapria*, and it belonged to the Malayan family of *Rafflesia*, a plant which bears the largest single blossoms in the world.

Two of the porters had found the *Sapria* flower as well as some buds growing among the roots of a tree. Although it looked more like a fungus than a flower, *Sapria* is not a fungus; it is a parasite which feeds on the roots of giant vines that go twisting themselves round the trees right up to the roof of the forest.

We laid the blossom on my camp bed, which was standing outside the tent, and we took a photograph of it there. The buds were as large as Jaffa oranges and the open flower measured ten inches across from the tip of one petal to another. It was blood red in colour, with thick fleshy petals (a quarter of an inch thick) covered with white lumps like blisters. Its deep centre was dark like dried blood, forming a circular shelf at the base of the thick, curving petals. The smell was awful.

For an hour or more the dogs kept walking round it, growling and eying the thing with deep suspicion. Poor animals—and poor all of us. If only their suspicions could have been aroused by something far more sinister which, though we did not know it then, was at that moment drawing nearer and nearer to the camp.

But throughout the day the *Sapria* remained the focus of interest for us all. Everybody in the camp kept coming to look at it, and the porters who had discovered it found themselves well rewarded.

When night fell and the *dam-dims* departed (as they always did after sunset, when the sandflies and mosquitoes took over) we retired to the tent, rejoicing in the cool air at that height in the forest.

I don't know for how long we had slept when we were awakened by a frightful yelling and barking from the dogs, both of whom were lying under the nets on our respective beds. At first I had some vague, sleepy idea that they must have got out and attacked the *Sapria*, left on the table in the dining-shed. Then my husband flashed his torch in time to see Tim bracing himself to attack through the mosquito net a strange dog that was standing in the narrow space between our beds.

It was not the amiable black dog that belonged to the porters, which usually went with them on these journeys. It was just an ordinary brown 'pi-dog', such as are common in any Indian village. But it had bitten Tim in three places on the face. It was standing looking calm though bewildered, while we held on to our own dogs, trying to restrain them from leaping away to attack again.

The strange dog moved slowly out of the tent, and we soothed and calmed Liz and Tim, bidding them stay in bed while we both



got up and went out to see if the other dog was still about.

The forest looked ghostly and indescribably wild. Huge trees were standing black yet luminous in misty moonlight, holding to the steep slopes of the mountains above us; more trees rising from the ledge round the camp; and trees again drawing close together in the blackness of night where the mountains fell away below the camp.

There was no sound from the servants' tent, nor from the porters' shelters; nothing but the voice of insects filling the darkness beyond the glowing embers of camp fires. A yard or so below the shelters we found the brown dog. He was standing watching us, looking like any normal village dog. Only he was silent.

"We'll see if he's hungry," my husband said. "He's probably one of the porters' dogs. If he wants food and gets it he'll settle down and go to sleep near one of the fires."

He went into the dining-shed and collected a mess of bread, tinned milk and scraps from our dogs' dinners. I stayed watching the brown dog while it nosed about, smelling the ground in a normal way. We emptied the food on to the ground and the dog ate everything ravenously. We gave it water, which it lapped, and we decided that all was well. The dog was not mad—it *could* not be mad (so we argued). It was only hungry and perhaps bewildered by strange surroundings. It moved off under the darkness of the trees, and we went back to bed.

I don't know exactly why we decided to light a hurricane lamp and stand it on the ground, its wick turned down to give enough light to illumine the tent dimly. Anyway, we did so, "just to be on the safe side".

We had not been back in bed five minutes before I saw a shadow moving on the side of the tent. I can't describe the horror of that pathetic shadow. But as soon as I saw it I knew that all our repressed fears had now become real, and dreadfully justified. For a split second I watched, trying not to believe, the fantastically enlarged shadow of a dog moving towards the tent. An ordinary sort of dog, only it was larger than life, and its shadowy ears were standing up, reaching to the top of the tent; and its shadowy head was followed by a body that moved towards the opening of the tent. I spoke as calmly as I could.

"It's coming back."

My husband answered: "It can't be!" Then as he, too, saw the huge shadow on the tent: "My God, it is! Don't move—don't stir! Only for God's sake hold Liz!"

I was doing that already, holding her as close as I could. Both she and Tim were barking, madly struggling to get out and

attack the poor creature whose shadow had now floated down, merging into the reality of the brown dog.

For a moment the dog stood still, seeming to look at us. We dared not move, for our one concern was to protect our own dogs from what we now recognized for certain; the ghastly horror of madness—of rabies, the worst, and probably the commonest, danger to their lives on the plains. We knew for certain that no normal village dog would have returned like this, nor would it have remained while we both yelled and shouted at it. Village dogs, poor miseries, are far too cowardly to face and reface abuse.

By this time the dog had come inside the tent and was walking round and round my bed. I was holding Liz under the covers, trying to restrain her while I kept myself as far as possible rigid in the centre of the extremely narrow bed. And the mad dog continued to walk softly round—with its muzzle pushed against the mosquito net. Then it moved across and began walking round my husband's bed.

We were quite helpless. If either of us had got out from under our nets (our only protection) we would probably have been bitten by the poor mindless creature. All we could do was to shout and yell, hoping that the dog would move out of the tent so that it would be possible to get at the gun and shoot. And then we heard a quiet voice saying:

“Huzoor?”

The cook! Years afterwards I can still hear that imperturbable voice raised on a note of inquiry as he came to find out what the trouble was. We warned him of the danger, telling him to stand back, but if possible to call the dog away. Again we heard the soothing tones of his old voice; so soothing that they seemed for the moment even to have soothed their way into the ferment of the mad dog's mind. Quite calmly he called to it and contrived to coax it out of the tent. Then he shooed it away and stood on guard awaiting further orders. My husband sprang up and handed Tim to me. “Hold the dogs tight,” he said, “and don't move. I'll have to shoot that wretched animal.”

He took the gun from the back of the tent, while I got up and knelt on the ground with my arms gripped round Liz and Tim, my head buried against them, wishing (as, God knows, I've often wished) that I hated all animals. Even the necessity to shoot a mad dog made me, for the moment, mad with a horrible sort of grief.

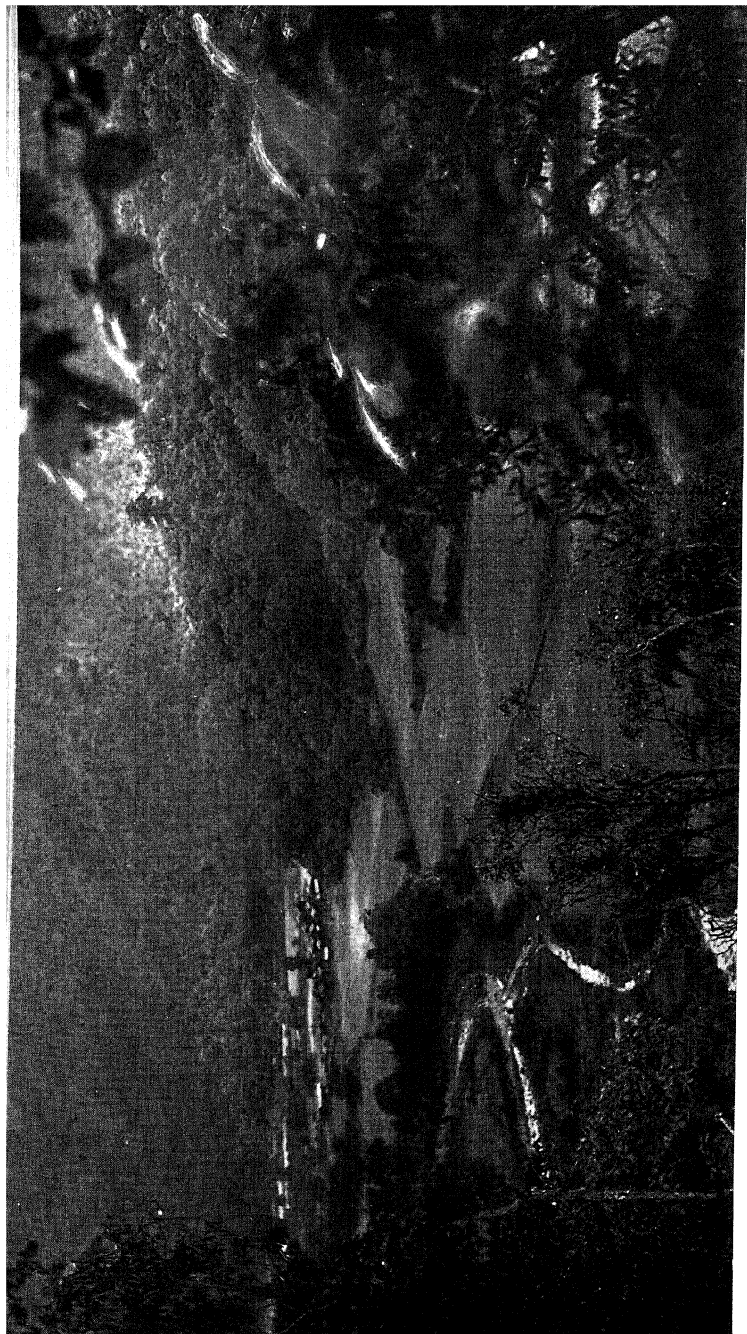
The whole rotten business was over within minutes, though it seemed ages while I knelt there in the tent, burying my head against our dogs, trying not to hear. But, of course, I heard every-



Strolling Players dressed  
for Dancing



Young Girl of Rupa (she  
wears her hair like a veil  
until betrothed)



Vale of Shergaon

thing, especially as the whole camp was stirring by this time, and my husband giving orders. I could guess what those orders were. Certain things had to be done when rabies was suspected, and one of those things must include the cancelling of our journey. Tim had been bitten on the face and he would have to be treated immediately if he was to be saved from rabies. Even so, his chances of escaping the horror were thin.

Moreover, the dead dog's head would have to be sent to the Pasteur Institute in Shillong for final proof of rabies. We tried to comfort ourselves with the hope that our suspicions might yet be proved wrong; but we knew that we were right.

Not one of the porters had seen the dog anywhere on the journey, so we knew that it must have strayed, dimly following us to our camp in this uninhabited part of the forest.

Hitherto we had always, on tour, rejoiced in the knowledge that for a time we were safe from the danger of mad dogs.

Rabies was not prevalent in the hill villages, which were separated from the plains by thirty to forty miles of uninhabited forest. But one of the symptoms of rabies is a tendency for the affected dog to wander—often travelling miles from its own home.

Dejectedly, we broke up camp next morning and travelled back to the muggy heat of the plains, poor old Tim being at once started on a ten-day course of triple doses of anti-rabic injections. Within a week the Pasteur Institute reported that their examination of the stray dog's brain had proved the presence of rabies. They recommended us to have Tim destroyed at once, his facial bites being too close to the brain—the brain being the part which is attacked by the virus of rabies.

We refused to destroy Tim. We knew that he had a chance and we wanted to give him that chance.

Tim never developed rabies. Within three weeks we were off again, this time completing our tour, meeting all our old friends of the hills, and blessing the planting of the young trees in the orchards of Rupa. Incidentally, when we came back to our camp in the ravine we found the dining-hut and our tent decorated with massed groups of *Sapria* blooms.

We had been able to smell the deathly stink of the flowers half a mile away, but we had to endure it in camp because we had not the heart to disappoint the porters. Nepalīs—born and bred in stinks—have not got sensitive noses, and they were convinced by their previous success that *Sapria* blooms must be even more appealing than the rhododendrons which, six months ago, had turned our camp into a bridal bower.

## *The Shifting Scene*

ANOTHER winter had come and gone. Never monotonous for us, varied as it was between weeks spent touring in the hills or in the forests and brief intervals in our house where my husband's work brought him into closer touch with the Daflas of the plains and the nearest hill villages.

To describe again those journeys which we repeated every year would be wearisome, though for us they were always filled with the excitement of fresh discoveries, the delight or the shock of the unexpected, and the pleasure of meeting again our friends among the hills.

But besides these there were our friends of the forest, the animals who, at one time or another, played so big a part in our lives. Galahad, although he was not very big in those days, played a very conspicuous part when he invaded the quiet routine of our life in the house at the edge of the forest—Galahad, the baby rhinoceros who came to live with us for a while.

The rhinoceros was discovered among the rice-fields twenty miles away, and was reported to be damaging the crops.

Taking the Ford car, my husband drove off to investigate the trouble, returning later with the baby rhinoceros riding in the back of the car, its amazing face looking out over the door as much at home, apparently, as Liz or Tim who adored motoring.

Galahad may have enjoyed the novelty of his first ride in a car, but he was certainly not feeling at home when we coaxed him to alight just outside our house. We found traces of a bad wound on his head, and, round his ankles, marks that showed where ropes had been tied so tightly that they had bitten into the flesh. Galahad, not much more than two feet high, had been

caught and bound like a dangerous animal. He stood beside the car with his head hanging down, a miserably homesick, very dusty and thirsty little rhinoceros.

Thinking of the tall grass jungle where rhinos tunnel a passage through the grass, it was easy to guess that he must be hating the dusty heat of the day, that he was bewildered and unhappy, dimly wondering when his mother would come to seek him. We emptied three buckets of water over him before he looked up and made a little grunting noise.

From the office, from the cookhouse and from the coolie-lines everybody had come to see the new arrival, one after another offering advice. I think it was Dwarikanath Das, the head clerk, who suggested that the shed that served the clerks as club and theatre should be taken over as a stable for Galahad.

The office staff adored amateur theatricals, and we had enjoyed many delightful shows in their theatre, but every one of them eagerly supported the head clerk's suggestion. They took pride in the thought that their theatre was to be occupied by an animal as valuable as a rhinoceros.

Of the jungle beasts the rhino is valued above all others. There are two reasons for this. The first I have already explained when I described the highly secret business that went on in order to procure rhino horns because of their inestimable value as an aphrodisiac. The other reason that sets a rhino's value high is due to the belief that its flesh is the only meat that a Brahmin may eat.

Galahad, therefore, was an extremely valuable animal, and it was necessary for him to be guarded night and day. We thought wistfully of our old forest friend, Bakharu, and of how he would have loved the job. As it was, four of the Nepali porters were appointed to guard him (the whole porter corps would have taken on the job if they had been allowed; as Hindus they were fully aware of the value of the rhino, an animal which has its home also among the forests of Nepal) and they immediately set to work to make the clerks' theatre into a happy home for Galahad.

They brought from the forest branches and creepers, twining them round the low bamboo walls till the place became a cool and shady bower.

When Galahad's wounds came to be cleaned and dressed we found that he had also received a bullet wound in one of his feet—sure sign, if we had not already suspected it, that poaching had been going on somewhere near where the young rhino was

reported to have been damaging crops. So young an animal was unlikely to have strayed far away from the protection of his mother, and we guessed that the mother must have been shot by poachers. Some weeks later her dead body was found on the banks of the Brahmaputra, near the fields where Galahad had been captured.

We were now faced with the problem of how to feed a baby rhino who was still young enough to have been fed by his mother. Nobody knew the strength of rhino milk but my husband's experience among elephants had given him an idea of the strength of elephant's milk. So Galahad's first meals were graded accordingly.

He was offered a basin of milk but did not know how to lap, and at first would only suck the milk off the hands of those who fed him—which meant pretty well everyone who had the remotest connection with our house or with the office. He soon discovered how to lap up his milk, after which he eagerly drank his regular twelve quarts a day, and—in his incongruously small voice—began to grunt or squeak for the pieces of choice grass and creeper that were fed to him.

But then unexpected trouble came. Galahad began to refuse his food. He became listless and fretful. We feared that his diet was wrong, that he was pining for his mother and for his jungle home. People went about with anxious faces, speaking in hushed voices. Was Galahad going to die?

From twenty miles away the vet came and shook his head. Undoubtedly the animal was very ill. Suddenly the vet's face brightened. What is the first question a doctor always asks? The vet asked it, and was satisfied.

"I think," he said, "there is no doubt. The animal is constipated. A strong purgative is needed."

The obvious explanation, of course. But what does a rhinoceros take to keep himself 'regular'? Nobody could tell us. The usual remedies might prove to be poison to a baby rhino. My husband solved it. He decided that one remedy at any rate was safe—an enema.

We can't be certain that he is the only man ever to have given an enema to a rhinoceros, but it seems likely that he is the only one to have performed the operation outside a zoo.

Naturally a crowd gathered to witness the proceedings. A crowd that was wild with excitement and ribald banter. But Galahad took it calmly. And with instantaneous benefit to his health. In a very few days he had settled down again, as easily as if he had been born in the clerks' theatre.



We never kept him tied up. When he was not in his 'stable' he played freely in the open space in front of our house, or in our garden—always attended by his devoted guards.

They used to play with him under the trees. It was a sort of game of hide-and-seek, the men dodging and hiding behind the trees while the rhino made dashes at them, swerving away with astonishing agility just when you thought he was bound to knock his man down. It was fantastic to watch the way the baby rhino would gambol and circle like an excited puppy. Sometimes he went berserk and galloped round and round the outside walls of his stable. We would watch him getting up speed before he disappeared behind the farther wall. And then we waited—sometimes wondering whether he had gone off in another direction. We waited until we could hear the little grunting noises that told us he was coming—at high speed, head down and horny body moving up and down, ridiculous feet pounding over the ground as he galloped past and disappeared again.

Often we knew him to repeat this performance eight or ten times before he swerved into the opening of his stable and sank exhausted among the straw.

Our dogs were intensely interested in Galahad, who, in his turn, showed no fear of them, allowing them to sniff him and even to lick his horny hide. But his greatest friend was a goat. The goat had been tied up as a bait for a tiger which a planter had hoped to shoot. The tiger did not come, but the goat bleated so pitifully that the planter led it away and handed it to one of our porters, saying he thought the poor thing ought to be given a good home.

Without a moment's thought the porter put the goat into Galahad's stable. We were away in the Aka country at the time and knew nothing about this until we returned and found that the goat and Galahad had become inseparable friends. At night they lay down together, the white goat nestling close against Galahad's armour-plated sides.

When the time came for Galahad to leave us, because he was getting rather large, the goat had to accompany him all the way to Calcutta, where Galahad was placed in the Alipore Zoo until his passage home could be arranged.

What happened to the goat I do not know, but Galahad went to Paris. We had news of his progress there a few years later, when he was reported to be in excellent condition. And then for fourteen years we heard no more. The war came and we often wondered what had happened to Galahad. We promised our-

selves that if ever a chance came, which seemed improbable, we would try to visit him in his Parisian home.

Our chance did come, eventually. Less than one year ago we went to Paris with the sole purpose of seeing Galahad. I had written to the Director of the Paris Zoo, and his reply had filled us with joy.

"... *votre rhinocéros*," he wrote, "*est en parfait état*."

Friends always want to know whether, after fourteen years, Galahad recognized us when we visited him in Paris. I must confess that even when we owned him as a pet the baby rhino recognized us only as human beings, a species of animal which, in his experience, was mostly friendly towards him. So we did not seek and did not find any sign of recognition in the two-ton mass of rhino that we saw in the Paris Zoo. Anyway he was fast asleep, lying out in the pale October sunshine when we saw him there. No persuasions of his keeper, and no appeals from us, would awaken him. But he was looking splendid.

His name had been changed to 'Philippe', and his keeper assured us that he was as tame, as friendly as ever.

Oddly enough, his horn had never grown. Apparently he had an incurable habit of rubbing the roots of the horn on the rocks of his lair, filing away the growth so that he had no more sign of a horn than the hard, shiny patch that was visible when first we knew him.

During Galahad's sojourn with us we received more visitors than we knew existed in our neighbourhood. People came from long distances to see our unusual pet. Some of them displayed astounding ignorance of the fauna of Assam. I remember one man who came and asked to see our hippopotamus. He was surprised to learn that such animals do not exist in India. Some of our callers had not even known that rhino lived in the jungle so near their homes.

Looking at our friendly little Galahad they found it hard to realize that elephants fear rhino more than any beasts of the forest. This is because a rhino is the only animal able to knock an elephant down. Even though his weight may be less, a rhino's centre of gravity is much lower than an elephant's. Therefore a charging rhino can easily overthrow an elephant.

When my husband was engaged on forest work we always had a number of elephants for touring; in those days whenever possible we would ride out in the evenings to see what we could of the animals in the jungle.

I thought that in my first chapter I had recalled most of our

adventures of those early days. But there was one at any rate which I overlooked. I can't think why, because it was far more dangerous than any of the others.

It happened one evening when we were moving through the tall grass jungle—typical 'rhino country'—both of us hoping for a sight of one of those great beasts that were becoming too rare—until Bakharu put a stop to the poachers' fun. Both of us hoping, also, that if we sighted a rhino it would be to leeward of us for we knew that our elephant might bolt if he got wind of a rhino.

High above the tall grass the elephant carried us along noiselessly save for the swishing of the tall grasses as he brushed against them. That kind of jungle grass grows as much as twelve feet high, forming an impenetrable wall through which no man can pass. But a man's hand could pass through it (if the wall were not too thick) exchanging rupees for a stolen rhino horn.

Here and there in the grass we saw low arched openings—not more than four feet high—the mouths of tunnels where rhino push their way through the grass. Looking into the tunnels you could see only as far as the light penetrated from the opening. Beyond a few feet, darkness hid the passage to wherever the animal had his lair.

To try to explore such tunnels would be suicidal. A rhino disturbed in his lair would charge immediately, rushing through the tunnel like an express train. And through the solid walls of grass there would be no escape. Rhino are very short-sighted and deeply suspicious.

Having charged an enemy they tear their victim with their teeth, not, as some suppose, using the horn as a weapon. They use the horn to hitch towards them the vegetation on which they browse—particularly a certain dainty-leaved creeper which forms one of their favourite foods. Wherever that creeper grows in the jungle, there, you may be sure, rhinoceros are about. There were quantities of it twined among the trees that evening as our elephant carried us along the narrow tracks between the walls of grass.

I was wondering what would happen if the elephant smelled an enemy and decided to bolt. In open grass jungle we ought to be all right as long as we held on, but if our animal made for heavy forest we would be swept off its back as it rushed under thickly growing trees. Almost at that moment the elephant began to shake.

I had never before heard about elephants 'shaking', and I did not know what was happening. The huge beast heaved his body over first to one side and then to the other, emitting deep grum-

bling noises from somewhere in the massive barrel of his body. I heard my husband call out:

"Hang on! Hold tight!"

I tried to do both. The elephant gave another heave and I found myself flung over his side, my hands still gripping the ropes that tied the mattress into place on his back. Still another heave—and my hands, galled by the rope, lost their grip. I felt myself slipping downwards.

There was an awful moment when I was aware of a clubbed grey foot seeming to be much too near my head. Then I jerked myself back and landed on the ground, while the grey clubbed foot moved onwards.

I was certain now that at any moment a charging rhinoceros must appear. I stood up and pressed myself back against the unyielding walls of grass, praying that the infuriated animal would have room to charge past without seeing me; but I doubted it.

The elephant, with my husband and the mahout, had moved on. They did not seem to have realized that I was no longer with them.

A frightful loneliness descended on me as I stood there in the silence of the jungle—waiting to be trampled and torn to pieces by a charging rhinoceros; waiting for the moment to come, longing for it to be over, too tense even to hear the elephant come back; until I heard a voice exclaim:

"Good God!"

I looked up and saw my husband, his face as white as paper, scrambling down from the elephant.

"What the—what happened?" he asked.

"The rhino—where is it?" I wanted to know.

"Rhino? There isn't one. Not yet, anyway. But—good Lord, you might have been killed!"

He almost threw me up on to the elephant's back, then climbed up after me, giving a sharp order to the mahout before he explained. He told me then that I had had a much narrower escape than I had guessed. Apparently the elephant must have got the smell of rhino, but instead of bolting it had tried first to shake off its riders. I had not known of this habit that some elephants have. Nor had I known (thank goodness!) that, having shaken off their riders, such elephants are liable to turn and kneel upon them, pounding them to death.

We never rode that elephant again.

A much more lovable animal was Karnaphuli, an old cow elephant who dearly loved her headquarters at Kulsī, a forest

village on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. She loved Kulsi because her work there was quiet and comfortable, also because her friend, Kamakia, another cow elephant, lived at Kulsi. Whenever Karnaphuli returned from work in the forests she started trumpeting to Kamakia while yet a mile away, and Kamakia's answering squeals could be heard echoing across the forest. Judging by the reverberating din of their calls to each other you would have expected them to rush with joy, rubbing their trunks together, remaining inseparable (like Galahad and the goat) until their next enforced parting. Instead of which, after all the squeals and trumpeting, neither of them paid the least attention to the other after reaching home. Having seen that her friend was there all right, Karnaphuli was content to ignore her for a while; content to settle down to the comfort of the quiet life she loved. But she hated loud bangs, so loathed being taken out on a shoot.

A day came when Karnaphuli was brought to a shooting camp near our headquarters north of the Brahmaputra. Because of her dislike of loud bangs it was arranged that she should be allowed to follow at a safe distance, carrying only the lunch basket and any game that might be shot.

The shooting party moved off and Karnaphuli came ambling on behind. In time somebody shot a deer which was loaded on to Karnaphuli's back. And still she moved contentedly along—until the sun rose higher, becoming uncomfortably hot; so hot that the lunch basket got overheated and the soda-water bottles burst with a noise like gunfire.

Karnaphuli did not hesitate. She bolted, making for the nearest cover under distant trees. Her mahout saved himself by sliding to the ground, while Karnaphuli vanished—with the deer and the lunch basket.

Three weeks later she turned up again at Kulsi. With the lunch basket, and the deer, still tied to her back she had swum the Brahmaputra and found her own way back to Kamakia and Kulsi. She must have wandered for nearly a hundred miles altogether since that moment when the soda-water bottles burst.

Except that for many years she had been a captive elephant, there was nothing unusual in Karnaphuli's ability to wander so far. We knew that elephants travel immense distances; in our wanderings we had had proof of their travelling in the most unlikely places. On one of our journeys up to Rupa we found the path below the pass almost impassable, ploughed into a morass of mud, pocked by the footprints of a herd of elephants. How the huge beasts had managed to lever themselves up the narrow,

slippery path was inconceivable. The trees and ferny undergrowth grew so close to the path that it was barely wide enough for men to move in single file; yet a large herd of wild elephants had ploughed their way up there, slipping and skidding on a path from which, in places, they might easily have fallen, plunging into the tangle of forest far below.

We were on our way at that time to see what progress had been made by the orchard trees planted at Rupa nearly two years before. It was our last journey to the home of the seven kings and we were looking forward to seeing the young orchards showing signs of promise.

The signs of promise, had we known it, were prophetically fulfilled by our last meeting with the seven kings.

They had organized no full-dress procession to welcome us to the orchards. Instead, we found the kings (more or less by accident) carousing in a field. In dress and dirt they were hardly distinguishable from Gurth the Swineherd, who, of course, was present. Instead of being royally mounted on white ponies each monarch was enthroned upon a heap of manure. They were as cheerful as ever, full of promises and plans for the care of their orchards (witness the heaps of lovely manure), confident of success.

Before another year had passed every fruit tree had died from neglect, and the orchards of Rupa have never since been heard of.

They are forgotten now; forgotten with so much else that may too soon be lost in the story of these people.

That was the last we saw of the seven kings of Rupa. Soon we would be seeing the last of the Akas and the Daflas; of the forest and the animals we had known. All of them, even our dogs, were soon to become as remote from the newness of our lives as Tibet lying hidden behind the Se-La Range. Tibet where we had longed to go but knew then that we would never reach—at any rate from Assam.

There had been a time when we had felt we were almost on our way there. That was when we visited the Momba country west of Shergaon, a country hidden amongst the hills over which climbs the shortest route to Lhasa.

We did not get very far because the cook became ill with malaria—so ill that we were seriously afraid for the old man. We had to hire a pony for him to carry him back to our home after penetrating only a three-day march up the Lhasa road. He refused at first to ride his pony, but as he was far too ill to walk we more or less pushed him into the saddle, wrapped a blanket round him and appointed a man to hold him there.

He recovered, thank goodness, very soon after we got him home, but we had no further chance of visiting the Momba country. Not that we yearned to go back there. The people of those parts had struck us as being apathetic and uninspiring, oppressively under the influence of the Tibetan monastery of Tawang whose lamas travelled up and down that road.

Memory of that brief journey up the Assam-Lhasa road has become blurred into vague pictures of the cook's illness; of a vast boulder covered with orchids; of a team of yaks crossing a stream; a lama making paper; ourselves drinking Tibetan tea in a village house; and—again, orchids. Masses of them falling in showers over the face of a cliff, and more orchids sprouting in the forked branches of the trees.

The orchids of Sikkim are famous but not many people realize the wealth and loveliness of those of Assam.

That huge boulder (as large as our bungalow) we saw was almost entirely covered with masses of one of loveliest orchids I have ever seen—*Dendrobium nobile*. Its white blossoms were tipped with violet, the petals springing from a centre of purple velvet. The orchids were growing in the moss on the top of the rock; they hung down over the sides—showers of exquisite colour curtaining the face of the rock, falling to where the river swirled below.

The rock itself (without its garden of orchids) was a magnificent thing, another of those giant boulders that had been left in the glen since the time of the last Ice Age. In that wild and rocky glen the orchid boulder was exotically lovely—a garden planted with 'hot-house' flowers that would make a horticulturist scream with envy.

A horticulturist, yes. But not necessarily a botanist. To a great many people a botanist is a disappointing sort of crank. The non-botanist (with whom I have every sympathy) expected us to return from every journey bearing sheaves of orchids, bumpers of primulas, and mighty baskets blazing with rhododendron and magnolia. But it is more often the less spectacular blooms that send a botanist into silent transports of delight. This was particularly the attitude of my husband, whose speciality was grasses.

True, he was as thrilled as I was by the blazing loveliness of the more showy flowers of the forest. But, except for the evil-smelling *Sapria* that we found near Pestiferous Camp, the greater part of his collection consisted of dried specimens of almost unnoticeable flowerets—and innumerable tufts of grass.

Early in our travels I had told him I expected some rare and wonderful orchid to be named after me. He assured me that my name would be immortalized.

It was. Or very nearly. The first specimen he proposed to name after me was the most disgusting fungus I have ever seen. Or smelt. Apparently it was a new species, or something of the sort. Anyway, I refused to allow my name to be associated with the thing. Eventually he named a grass after me. It was an emaciated, wizened looking affair, apparently of intense interest to a botanist. But not to me. And so it came about that most of his more valuable discoveries had almost as little appeal for me as for the Mombas moving up and down the flowery, wooded glen.

Up and down that lovely glen, throughout the months from October to May, men and women passed, some of them twirling prayer-wheels hailing the Jewel in the Lotus Bud, their minds dulled, unawakened to the jewelled beauty of orchids shining among the green and gold of sun-splashed trees on the Assam-Lhasa road.

That such a road exists is not known to many people, beyond those who use it as a thoroughfare. Its existence *may* have been heard of by two American soldiers who, during the war, made a bid to reach Lhasa from Assam. But they made a mistake of about two hundred miles in their choice of the right road.

They arrived first in an aeroplane far away to the north-east where the Brahmaputra comes tumbling down out of the hills.

A friend of ours saw the plane land, and he saw its doors open to allow a jeep to come out—a vehicle that carried two Americans and enough stores and equipment to last for a week. The Americans drove the jeep up to the Englishman and asked him to direct them to the road to Lhasa.

"There isn't one," they were told.

"But there must be," they insisted. "The Brahmaputra flows past Lhasa, doesn't it? They call it by some other name there——"

"Yes. The Tsang-po."

"That's it. But it's the same river that comes out of the hills right here. Well, we want to go and see this Daily Lama. So we'll be glad if you'll just show us the road so that we can be off in the jeep."

It was almost impossible to convince them that there was no motor road to Lhasa. No road anywhere in the world that would carry a jeep through to Tibet. They just could not believe that anyone so famous as the "Daily Lama" lived beyond the reach of wheeled traffic.

It was sad for them. They had only wanted to pay a friendly call on the ruler of Tibet.

But, like ourselves, they had to turn away from the primitive forests of Assam.



## *A Thousand Miles Away*

**P**ERHAPS not quite a thousand miles, but not far short of it, to Dehra Dun, whither we were transferred from the jungles and the hills of Assam. Nearly a thousand miles lay between us and Assam, yet our new home was still below the Himalayas. The same great chain of mountains rose above our garden. But it was a different kind of garden and a very different home. The hills themselves looked different—denuded of forests, bare and brown as a desert, lacking the depths of blues and greens that imbued the eastern hills with mystery.

Moreover, instead of the white crests of the Se-La Range the hills up here were topped by the untidy hill station of Mussoorie, nearly five thousand feet above us, which was lit up at night so that it looked like a great liner riding the waves above the hills.

The breakaway from Assam had broken up our old sort of family life. The old cook was no longer with us; he had been unable to bring himself to travel so far from his own province. Except for Khatm Mia (who now took over the cook's duties, and did them extremely well) we had to accustom ourselves to a completely new domestic staff. Also, in time, to new dogs. Liz was still with us, but Tim had died some months before we moved. We had another spaniel now, a golden cocker named Morna. She was extremely beautiful and exceedingly disobedient. Also, she had a shrewish habit of snapping viciously as soon as she had lured the unwary into patting her red-gold head.

In fact, when we moved to Dehra we had to accustom ourselves to an entirely new way of life.

In the first place, my husband was no longer either a forest officer or a political officer. After leaving the Balipara Frontier

Tract we had gone home on leave, returning to find ourselves stationed in Shillong, the capital of Assam, where my husband was appointed forest botanist. It was work he loved, but neither of us loved Shillong. Apart from our dislike of the social atmosphere of an Indian 'hill station' I was never able to like Shillong because the place was always associated with something bad or sad happening in one's life.

It wasn't Shillong's fault, it just happened like that. Further, in all the years we lived in Shillong we never had a home of our own. We lived either in hotels or in the houses of friends. Or we lived apart—as we had to, later, when the war was at its worst.

And so, when my husband was appointed forest botanist at the Imperial Research Institute in Dehra Dun we were glad to leave Shillong, excited by the prospect of our new home, a home which, when we arrived there, was bewilderingly grand after the sort of dwellings we had been used to.

The house was so magnificent that I seldom felt really at home in it. We had been there only three days when a succession of callers 'looked in' one evening. They kept on looking in, and they kept coming and coming; but they would not go. It was long past our supper time and I was getting bored and sleepy. At length I forgot I was in my own house. I got up and said:

"Well, I'm afraid we must be going now."

The callers went then.

But the old way of life was changed for us irrevocably. There were no more walks into the jungle in the evenings; no touring into the hills; no tribal feuds being fought out in the office; no friendly savages from the hills—no Daflas, Akas or any other tribes. Except for the magnificent view of Mussoorie (a resort which at close quarters looks as if it had been hammered out of biscuit tins) we had no contact with the hills, or with the people whose country, Tehri-Garwahl, lay behind the treeless foothills.

Our gardeners (we were now so 'grand' that we had two) were hill men, Garwahlis, whose cheeriness reminded us of our Nepali porters. Like the porters, too, they had ferocious tempers and it was not long before we discovered that they disliked each other intensely. I had to protest twice when I heard them quarrelling in a flower-bed.

'Quarrel' is hardly an adequate word to describe the frightful row I interrupted. Rows on such a scale may perhaps be typical of home life in Tehri-Garwahl, but it sounded to me like a prelude to murder. Both gardeners were armed with several kinds of knives and garden implements which they kept throwing on the

ground when they weren't brandishing them. By managing to yell one tone louder than the men I contrived to halt the row; but a few months later it broke out again.

I was in the pantry at the time, and had not heard that another row was going on in the garden. So it was a shock when the head gardener dashed in with blood pouring from a deep wound in his head. His face was covered with blood which was dripping on to the pantry floor. He was incoherent with rage, but there was no need to ask for an explanation; it was obvious that the undergardener, unless dead, had won the battle.

As I washed and dressed the wound I guessed that nothing but luck, or the agility of the victim, had stopped the blow being fatal. All the servants had come to share the excitement, and they agreed that a murderous assault had been made by the undergardener who, they told me, had thrown down his tools and run away. He never came back. He was a good gardener and we were sorry to lose him, but there was no doubt that another quarrel on that scale would certainly have ended in the death of one of the two Garwahlis.

Dull though the foothills looked (save when winter sunsets made them glow with light and colour) it was not possible to live so near them without wanting to know what lay beyond. Those dry, treeless slopes showed how the Assam hills might look if nothing were done to check the ruthless destruction of the forests. We had seen the threat of it in the hills round Rupa and Shergaon. Here, in the hills above Dehra Dun, we saw the fulfilment of man's destructive zeal.

There was not a tree or a bush, not a gleam of water, hardly even a rock or a hollow, to vary the face of hills so featureless they might have been cut out of cardboard; nothing but dry gullies and stony water-courses to show where mountain streams had splashed their way among the forests that once had clothed these hills.

Our garden was separated from the hills by a wide river bed. In the monsoon months the river became a dangerous flood but in the winter it was a valley of stones with only a rare pool of stagnant water lying amongst the boulders. Yet at one time, while the hills were still covered with moisture-holding forests, the whole of the Dun Valley must have sung with the voice of streams and rivers. Today the district has to be watered by canals.

Those cardboard foothills were curiously uninviting. More interesting seemed the low Siwalik hills, none of them much

above three thousand feet high, forming the southern boundary of the Dun Valley.

Curiously saw-toothed in outline, the Siwaliks at first sight appear to be an entirely different range from the great mountains north of the valley. Although they rise six to ten miles south of the Himalayas they belong to those mountains because they once formed part of the main range. One way and another, the Himalayas are continually pouring their substance down to the valleys and the plains, and it is from this substance—the debris of the mountains—that the Siwaliks have risen.

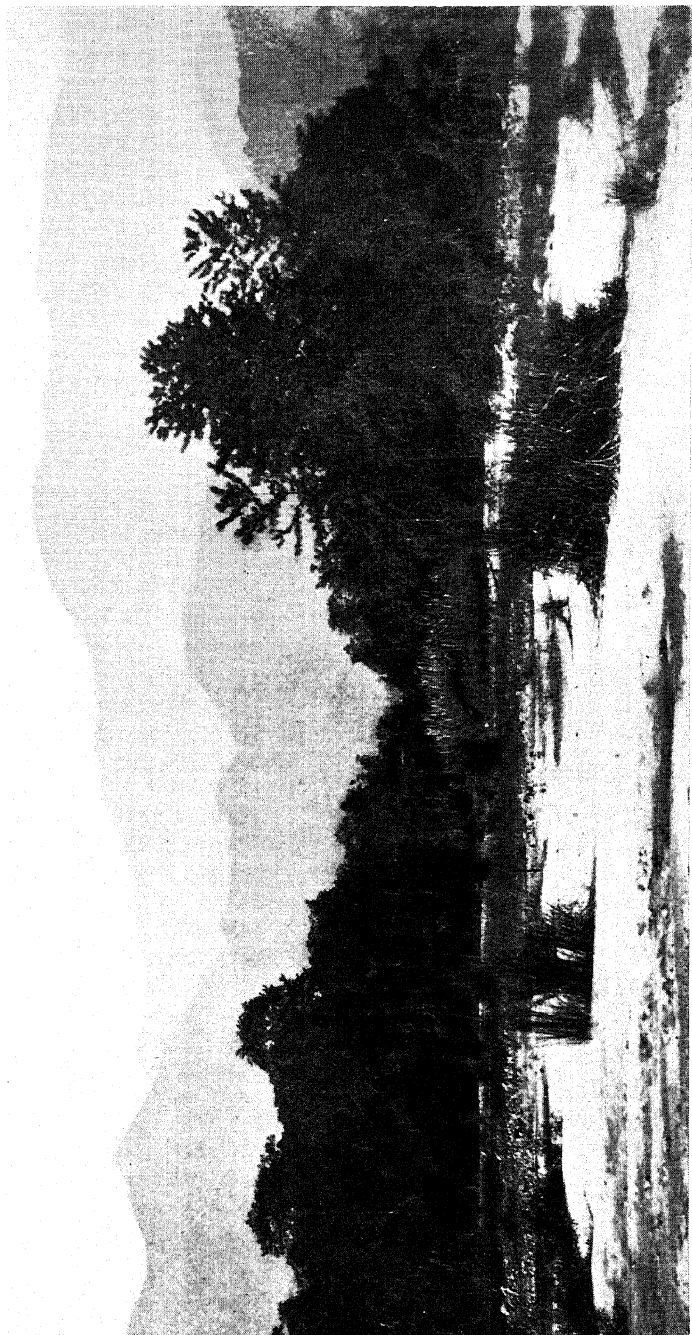
A vast number of years ago and throughout the course of ages that debris was poured downwards, gradually being spread out across the plain at the foot of the mountains. Then, through the work of earth movements underneath, the debris became pushed upwards—disturbed and pushed and piled, rubble and sandstone being shoved up into the shape of the Siwalik Range as it is known today.

In the strange formation of the Siwaliks can be traced not only the story of crushed rock and debris but also a long page in the story of animal life recorded in the fossils found embedded in the sandstone. Among these fossils is that of a creature sometimes wrongly referred to as 'Siwalik man'—a creature which lived many millions of years ago, but which was probably not related to even the most primitive of man's presumed ancestors. It seems to have been some kind of an ape that became extinct a great many years ago.

All along the line of the Himalayan foothills there occurs a 'fault'—a crack in the earth's crust. Not only has this fault played a big part in the upheaval of the Siwaliks but it is the cause of earthquakes that are liable to occur almost anywhere in regions immediately below or among the Himalayas.

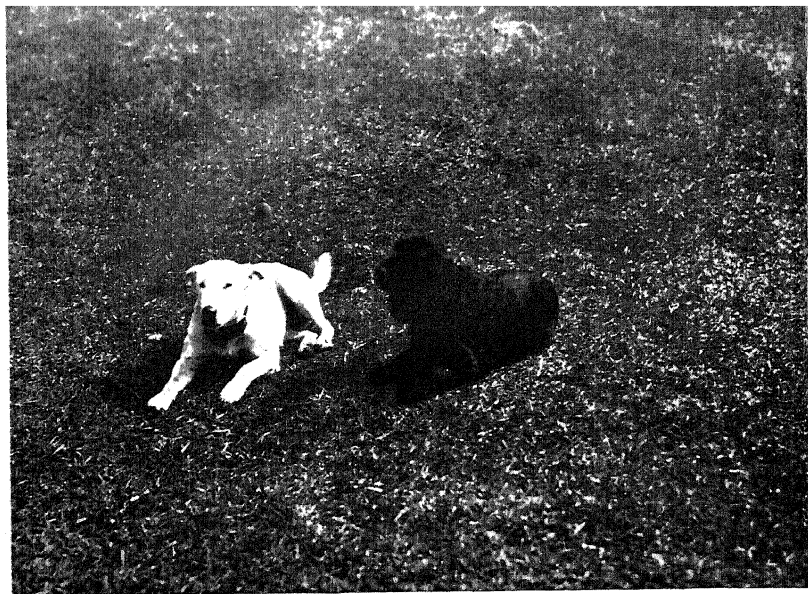
In Assam earthquakes are so frequent that nearly all buildings are earthquake-proof, being built of lath and plaster, with as few bricks as possible. To build with bricks in an earthquake area is to invite certain disaster sooner or later. And yet in northern India so many of the houses were built of bricks! In the appalling earthquake in Quetta in 1935 there might have been infinitely fewer casualties if the buildings had not been of brick or stone.

The one favourable aspect of thick-walled brick buildings is found in their resistance to heat in the very high temperatures of northern India. By closing all doors and windows in the early mornings, and by keeping them closed till after sunset, it is possible to insulate such houses to some extent against the fierce heat of



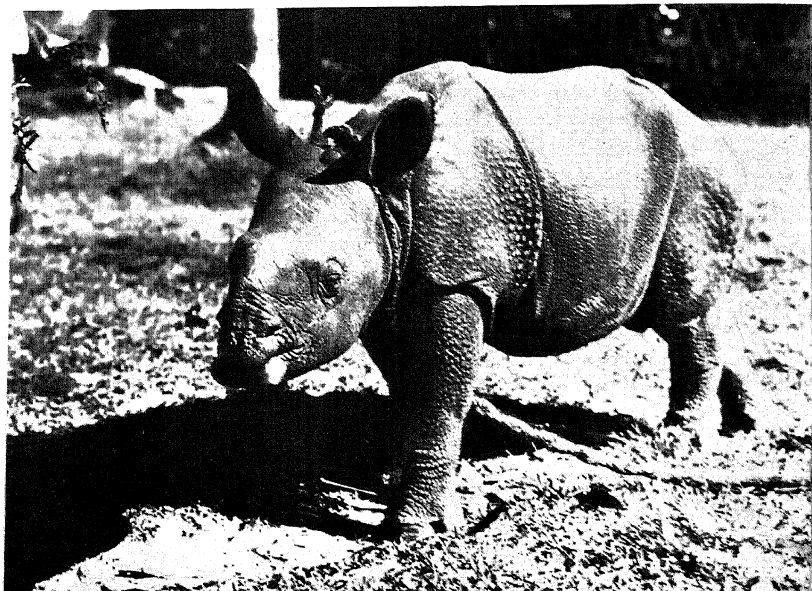
Piri-La Mountain from the Plains

This river in flood was the scene of trouble described on pages 78—81



Liz and Tim

Galahad



the day. In the summer of Dehra I found that I could keep our house twenty degrees cooler than the outside air.

At the same time we were dismayed by the sight of our beautiful brick bungalow—accustomed, as we were, to the thin-walled, earthquake-proof houses of Assam. We knew that we were still living on the line of the ‘fault’ where few places can be reckoned safe from earthquakes.

Indeed, the Siwaliks in their formation and their history are geological proof of the instability of this region, since it is known that these hills have assumed their present condition largely because of the disturbing effects of the fault. Geologists know that the Siwaliks and the valley between them and the foothills have not yet attained ‘equilibrium’, and they can point to hills now forming on the Indus-Ganges Plain which are still being pushed up (imperceptibly to us) by the agency of the fault.

If we were dismayed by the sight of our beautiful brick bungalow, I know I was positively horrified by my first sight of the Forest Research Institute where my husband’s office was.

This magnificent building, a quarter of a mile long and certainly a hundred and twenty feet high, with turrets rising higher, was built entirely of very small bricks held together by cement. When I suggested to friends that such a building was a potential danger in an earthquake area they scoffed. They told me that in Dehra earthquakes were rare enough to be negligible.

“We don’t get bad ‘quakes here,” they said.

I don’t know that any bad ‘quakes had been known in Quetta before the disaster of 1935—or in Bihar, where the death-roll was also appalling not very long before the Quetta calamity. It is amazing how many people are ignorant of the facts concerning earthquakes. Too often they associate them with volcanic conditions, where eruptions and subterranean grumblings *may* give some warning of probable disaster. But the earthquakes caused anywhere along the thousand-mile length of the sub-Himalayan fault are pretty well entirely unpredictable.

I have even heard people remark on a heavy sultry day that it was ‘earthquaky kind of weather’, as though the weather had any sort of connection with the restless mood of the fault.

Pretty well any place lying near the foot of the Himalayas is liable to earthquakes which, in the present state of knowledge, cannot possibly be foretold.

Years, perhaps centuries, may pass without any big disturbance. And then without any warning the moment comes when the earth trembles—shifting, pushing, slipping and cracking open

—adjusting itself to the instability of the fault. The movement may be slight, or it may be violent and prolonged, followed by shorter and perhaps sharper 'quakes.

Nearly always an earthquake causes landslides that may tear a tremendous gash in the face of the mountains. The recent earthquake in Assam, in the summer of 1950, appears to have been worse than anything ever before recorded in that area.

Terrifying as it must have been, I cannot help wishing that I might have had the experience of it—provided that I could have been safe from the disaster of flood and landslide. Although we have had many first-hand accounts of the earthquake it is not for me to try to describe what I myself have not experienced. I can only say that the loss of life and of property was almost entirely due to landslides, and to the sudden flooding of huge rivers which came bursting through the debris that had blocked their course.

Barely two weeks after we had arrived in Dehra a considerable earthquake shook the Dun Valley and the foothills. I was in the house at the time but hurried outside, thinking with horror of that vast mass of bricks, the Forest Research Institute, where my husband at that moment was working in his office. However, although everything seemed to be shaking like a blancmange, boards creaking and crockery rattling, no damage was done, and again I was mocked for voicing my opinion of brick buildings in such an area.

Throughout five years in Dehra Dun there were no more shocks. But that is no guarantee that shocks will not come again, and be worse.

Nobody expected disaster in Quetta. Nobody expects one in Dehra Dun—nor anywhere else where a disastrous earthquake has never been experienced.

Bricks and rubble and earthquakes, and debris of the mountains. It sounds as though our new way of life must have been as drear and dusty as an ash-heap. Far from it. It was highly entertaining and full of new interests. But, close to the hills though we were, our life was no longer concerned with the hills.

Too rarely in those years did we have a chance to go any depth into the hills. To do so meant going on 'special duty', or taking short leave as we did when for a few days we were able to escape into the wilderness beyond Chakrata, sixty miles away from the social whirl of Dehra Dun.

Chakrata was a lovely place, but it was also a military station, and therefore too civilized for our needs, so we moved away



farther and higher into the hills, halting first at Deoban, nine thousand feet above the plains.

Perched on a hill at Deoban stands a rest-house surrounded by forests of deodar—oceans of forest rolling over the hills, filling the valleys where conifers give way to vegetation of warmer climates; forests rising up over the distant ranges of hills, range upon range rising one beyond another, bluer and deeper blue till they became merged into the misty blue of the farthest foothills—with the white crests of the great Himalayas again reminding me of foam breaking above the waving horizon of the hills.

At last we could feel that we were again among 'the hills'—the glory of the mountains hidden behind the cardboard hills of Dehra.

From Deoban we saw more of the Himalayas than we had ever seen before. In a little clearing among the deodars we stood and tried to realize the magnitude of what we saw, for we were looking at what the encyclopaedia describes as "the most central and conspicuous range in the Himalayas".

From the extreme right to the farthest left the snow crests of the mountains formed an unbroken arc, one end rising from Kashmir far to the west—and the other from the lovely peak of Nanda Devi far away to the east, near the borders of Nepal.

The extent of the range must have been at least two or three hundred miles, and it was very near to us. Within that single view there were one hundred and twenty peaks all over twenty thousand feet in height. Even while I was trying to count the peaks I could not help thinking of A. G. Macdonell's magnificent quotation from a guide-book:

"If Rome, which is built on seven hills, is the most beautiful city in the world, how much more beautiful is San Francisco which is built on *fourteen* hills?"

—and I asked myself: "If the Se-La Range has three peaks lovelier than anything I have ever seen, how much lovelier is *this* range, which has a hundred and twenty?"

The answer should have been a matter of simple arithmetic, but I could not make it come right. One hundred and twenty peaks are *not* forty times as lovely as three isolated goddesses reigning superb in their loneliness above the forests of Assam. When we turned our heads to look from one end to the other of that great arc of mountains we knew again the old longing to be able to go onwards beyond the farthest hills to where the glaciers

came down, to the places where the snow must always lie far above the level of the last hardiest trees.

But a very short journey into the Chakrata hills appeased our longings; for a while.

The Himalayas of those parts are too popular and too easily accessible to people living in the larger towns of northern India. That is not to imply that the glaciers are crowded, or that that vast world of mountains is crawling with tourists. But—well, we had been spoilt by the solitudes of Assam.

In our one short tour into the hills beyond Chakrata we found excellent rest-houses every ten miles or so; and so did a number of other people. Very nice people, indeed; many of them were friends we had already met and would meet again dozens of times. It was not for that that we had gone away into the mountains. We wanted the wilderness to ourselves, as it had been in Assam, we wanted to share it with no one except those people of the hills whose world it rightly was.

The discovery that so many others wanted and were able to do what we were doing destroyed for us the charm that had cast a spell upon our wanderings in Assam.

So that was the only expedition we made into the mountains behind the cardboard foothills. It did not take us very far; it taught us nothing of the people of the hills because we never even saw any—no one except the sort of people who came from Delhi and Lahore.

It should have been a lesson to us. We ought to have realized then that when we left Assam we had left behind, for always, the days of lonely journeys.

But we never learnt the lesson; we always expected to get the mountains to ourselves and when our next chance came we looked forward to it with the eagerness of pioneers. The next journey we made took us much farther away—right away, we imagined, from the reach of other travellers. It took us deeper into the mountains and over passes much higher than we had ever crossed before. It took us—at last—beyond the outer ranges, right up to the snow-line; to the borders of Tibet. It took us to Lahoul.

## *Towards the Pass*

UNTIL we planned our first journey there we had never heard of Lahoul. Later (counting two visits we paid) we spent nearly three months in the district, till we came to feel almost more at home there than in the brick bungalow in Dehra Dun.

Briefly, Lahoul is a country lying among the high Himalayan valleys beyond the Rohtang Pass and below the higher passes into Ladakh, Spiti and Tibet. The Rohtang Pass hangs above the Kulu Valley of the north Punjab, and Ladakh and Spiti, which encroach upon the high plateau of Tibet, are reckoned by Tibetans as provinces of their own country. So in journeying to Lahoul and beyond we came very near to realizing our ambition to reach Tibet itself.

Although our first visit to Lahoul was a glorious holiday for ourselves it did not count as 'leave'. In his capacity as forest botanist my husband was sent up there to collect specimens for the Forest Research Institute.

In the beginning our journey was thoroughly unpleasant. We left Dehra towards the end of April, at the hottest time of the year—experiencing our first taste of a shade temperature of 120 degrees.

Khatm Mia came with us as cook and general houseman; and we had Liz and Morna. A new friend who also joined the party was Kirit Ram, a Garwahli employed as botanical collector and mounter at the Forest Research Institute. Unlike our Garwahli gardeners, Kirit Ram was a man of calm and imperturbable temperament. He appeared to be even more imperturbable than the old cook. We never saw Kirit Ram enraged as the old cook had been—upon occasion.

Hillman though he was, Kirit Ram remained unruffled by the heat on the unpleasant journey. Khatm Mia enjoyed the heat, but for ourselves and for the dogs it was detestable.

Following the custom of those who can afford it, we arranged for a *maund* (eighty pounds) of ice to be put in our compartment on the train. By closing all windows and turning the electric fan down to beat above the ice one achieves, for a while, a passable effect of air conditioning. Every hour or so we used to rub the dogs' heads with ice. It gave them wonderful relief and enabled them to sleep oblivious of the awful heat.

An eighty-pound block of ice is an undoubted help on those appalling journeys across India in the height of summer. But it is a messy help. As the ice melts it splashes over the container and on to the floor, mingling with dust and grit and all the dirt of the train. Too soon you find yourself wading in black slush that swills about with the swaying, rocking motion of the train.

One wonders just what conditions amounted to in the instance of a young man (name unknown) of whom a story is told that probably has at least some sort of foundation.

The hero was a British subaltern who could never remember the English equivalents of Indian weights and measures. He was hopelessly mixed over pounds and *maunds*, and *seers* which are equal to two pounds. The only thing that was clear was that the number forty seemed to have something to do with the calculation. But whether there were forty *seers* in a *maund*, or forty *maunds* in a *seer* he could not decide.

When he found himself ordered to travel by train across the Sind Desert, one of the hottest journeys in the world, he remembered the advice of friends who had adjured him to take enough ice to keep him reasonably cool on the journey.

Exasperated by the heat and distracted by mental arithmetic he eventually decided that he had better arrange for forty *maunds* of ice to be put into his compartment.

Whether the full forty *maunds* were obtainable I do not know. Even half that amount would have presented a problem. Anyway, the young man took a four-berth sleeping compartment and watched while his frozen assets were stacked away.

Every berth was laden with blocks of ice. The floor was packed with it to the level of the upper berths. More ice was stored in the adjoining lavatory. At last the young man, wrapping himself in a great coat, climbed up to the top of the ice wall, arranged his bedding as best he could, and settled down to enjoy his journey.

At every station he got out and did 'cabby exercises' on the

platform—watched by heat-drowsy eyes from the stifling train. Elsewhere people were gasping, fainting—dying of heat-stroke. But in the arctic interior of his compartment the young subaltern sat swathed in blankets, shivering with cold.

When he arrived at the end of his journey he was taken away on a stretcher—delirious with pneumonia.

The thought of him and his forty *maunds* (about three thousand pounds) of ice helped us to some extent to laugh at the acute discomfort of that part of our journey to Lahoul.

To some extent our journey also ended in rather the same way. The heat, the dust and the dirt, and the sudden change to the cooler climate of the hills, caused us to arrive at Manali, six thousand feet up in the Punjab hills, with the most disgusting colds in the head.

Of the lorry drive from the railway up into the mountains I have vivid and horrible memories. The road was worse than any I had encountered before in the way of motor roads, and the driver drove at a dangerous speed the whole way. When we turned into the valley of the Beas River my nerves, already frayed, were not improved by the frequent sight of notices warning you to 'beware of falling rocks'. If any of those overhanging cliffs and lightly balanced boulders had fallen on us we would have had no time to beware of them, or of anything else in this life.

By the time we reached Manali we were too tired and sodden with streaming colds even to be aware of the loveliness of the place. We stayed there, at the forest bungalow, just two nights, spending most of the time sitting over a smoky fire, sneezing, blowing and moaning complaints to each other. Khatm Mia was our main ray of sunshine in a dismal little world. He produced for us our usual camp dinner—roast fowl followed by what the old cook used to call 'Soot Pudding'.

In the old days in Assam we never varied our diet in camp. The midday meal was cocoa and cheese. For dinner we always had roast fowl one night, and the remains of the fowl made into a hash the next night—always followed by a suet pudding.

The sight of our old camp diet revived us a bit. The smell of it was irresistible. And when Khatm Mia produced tripe for Liz and Morna we almost wept for joy. The dogs had never tasted tripe before and they wolfed it ravenously. With disastrous results for Liz.

The bull terrier was then nearly eleven years old, but, until that journey, as full of energy as ever. Tripe, however, proved too much for her ageing organs. She developed violent diarrhoea

and sickness; also, she was already sickening for serious illness, though we did not know it then.

Streaming with a cold as he was, my husband had to get up six times that night in order to take Liz 'to the bathroom'. The usual fear of leopards and of mad dogs made it impossible to let our dogs go out unattended. Tigers will not attack a dog. But leopards will carry them away from the path before your feet, and we knew too well the unpredictable danger of mad dogs.

Two days later we left Manali—myself mounted, unwillingly, on a pony. As we were making for altitudes higher than we had yet known (the Rohtang Pass is nearly fourteen thousand feet high) I was ordered to ride a pony to help me over the pass and along the ten-thousand-foot valleys beyond. Besides, like Liz, I was getting older. The days of marching through the forests seemed a very long time ago.

Passing through Manali on our way up to Kothi, the rest-house below the Rohtang Pass, we noticed how utterly lovely the place was. As lovely as a Swiss valley.

Great forests of deodar, spruce and fir went marching rank upon rank up to steep mountain walls, right up to the snow levels above ten thousand feet. From the forested mountains brawling streams came tumbling down, meandering through meadows to pour their waters into the Beas River where it flowed broad and lovely as the Tweed, full of huge trout that lure fishermen to the valley.

We were enchanted and began making plans to come back one day and to stay longer, and more comfortably, in Manali.

Kothi was nearly eight miles farther up the valley. We were still following the Beas River and just before we came to Kothi the bridle track climbed above the gorge cliffs, cliffs that drew so close together that the river was no longer visible, seeming as though it had been forced into a subterranean channel.

Its depth below those cliffs must have been tremendous. We could hear the thundering fury of the river far below, the imprisoned torrent raving as it plunged through hidden caverns. We went as near as we dared to the edge of the cliff. Even so, the river was hidden from us, the terrifying din rising from somewhere far below the overhanging cliffs.

Impressive as all this was, it was a relief to unload ourselves at Kothi rest-house, where Khatm Mia immediately took possession and started to make things comfortable for us. We were all feeling much better, longing for a meal, thankful to have the three-roomed rest-house to ourselves.

My husband and Kirit Ram went out at once, seeking their specimens among the higher meadows above the house. I unpacked a few belongings and then lay down to rest upon the bed already prepared for me. Both Liz and Morna settled themselves beside me, their contented sleepiness contributing to my own feeling of drowsiness.

And then Liz got up abruptly. From the look of her I saw she was going to be sick. She was. Extremely sick, all over the veranda. It was the tripe again.

I grabbed two old copies of *The Statesman* and prepared to clean up the mess. I had hardly begun the work when I heard the jingle of harness and the sound of British voices.

Still clutching the crumpled pages of *The Statesman* I looked over the veranda rail. The very worst was about to happen. Three riders were turning their ponies up the last steep ascent to the bungalow.

I had time to see that the party consisted of a young man (Army type), a young woman, and an elderly lady of firm appearance.

Wishing myself, or the newcomers, somewhere at the bottom of the Beas Gorge I made a final sketchy attempt to clean up the veranda. And I called to Khatm Mia to remove our stores from the second bedroom, for we had spread ourselves over the whole place. Then I went out to face the new arrivals.

The elderly lady had dismounted from her pony and was advancing upon me with the light of battle in her eyes.

"I'm awfully sorry," I said. "We didn't know—we thought no one was coming. I'm afraid we've got an awful lot of stuff. But I'll get the rooms cleared in a minute."

"We booked our accommodation here," she told me.

"Yes. I mean—I know. Of course——"

"We've a right to be here. We've got our passes and our reservations."

"Oh, yes. It was only that we didn't know. I'll——"

"You can't prevent us coming."

The young man interrupted here—apologetically.

"It's only for one night," he said. Then turning to the indignant lady he added: "It's all right, Mother. There'll be room for all of us."

Again I apologized for having monopolized the bungalow. And then Khatm Mia appeared and reported that he had cleared the other room. I offered to clear the living-room, too. To confine ourselves to one room for the night. After all, we were in the

minority. And I murmured some sort of reference to the dog being sick.

Within moments everyone was pacified. We might have been lifelong friends.

But I was much alarmed. Was this sort of thing going to happen all the way to Lahoul, as it had been in the hills beyond Chakrata? The newcomers (young man and wife and mother-in-law) were staying only one night. They intended to go up to the Rohtang Pass and to return to Manali the following day. But other parties might have preceded us. At every bungalow all along our route we might have to double up with the overflow from Simla and Lahore. It seemed as though the sociability of Dehra was sending out tentacles, as though unwilling to let us slip back too far over the edge of the map, too easily back into the solitude that was ours wherever we had moved among the mountains and the forests of Assam.

Leaving the new arrivals to settle themselves, I called the dogs and went off up into the meadows to warn my husband what he must expect.

It was no use making a fuss about it. We were, we agreed, no longer in Assam. In any case, nothing and nobody could dim the splendour or dwarf the vastness of the mountain world that confronted us when we crossed the pass next day.

On that journey, not far above Kothi we passed the last of the trees above the valley. We came out from the forests on to the bare hillside, still following the course of the Beas River. As we neared the top of the pass the broad river of the valley was no more than a typical mountain stream, a tumbling beck sliding from under shelving drifts of snow, chattering over pebbly shallows, or moving quiet and deep among the peaty hollows of the hills.

When at last we reached the pass the great Beas River was a tiny stream, half blocked by ice and snow, seeking its way out of a marshy hollow in a vast wilderness of mountains.

When you reach the levels of the Rohtang Pass you realize at once that you have arrived. To those unused to height the climb is stiff, yet at the same time easy. It involves no hair-raising precipices or heart-breaking work over stones or shale. We had followed a well-graded bridle path that had zig-zagged upwards in long gentle rises. Nevertheless, the height affects those who are not used to it. After all, fourteen thousand feet is not much below the height of Mont Blanc.

All the more reason for our pride in Khatm Mia, whose home was far away among the enervating plains of Sylhet, as we



watched him uncomplainingly moving upwards over the long, swerving rises of the track.

To Kirit Ram, of course, such heights were nothing. Already he was wandering about gathering such flowers as only a botanist could find among grassy slopes still streaked and patched with snow. It was too early yet for the full glory of the alpine meadows. That was something we could look for on our journey back.

Somewhere near the top of the pass I found myself ahead of everyone else. I halted my pony and waited for them to catch up. They were all moving slowly, even the pack animals labouring as they heaved themselves up above the twelve-thousand-foot levels. I watched them pass, and then saw Khatm Mia, grasping a heavy stick as he made his way along.

I called out to him, asking how he was getting on. He looked up smiling, and replied:

*"Asté, asté jata bilkhul thik hoga."* (Slowly, slowly does it.)

Really the man was a wonder. And at the end of the day's journey he would kick off his shoes and start preparing a meal for us. He would be making beds, unpacking stores and cooking meals, and he would be ready to start off again at an early hour the following day.

On the farther side of the pass snow lay deeply in great drifts that we had to cross. It was Khatm Mia's first sight of snow at close range. All his life he had seen it shining far away and high above the plains of Assam. He had seen it in the distance on the foothills above Dehra, but this was his first experience of its touch and texture. He was extremely interested, delighted at the thought of telling his Assam friends all about it one day.

The dogs, too, were delighted. Neither of them had seen snow before and even Liz became puppyish in her joy. The long, slow walk up to the pass had done her good and she gambolled and frisked with as much joy as Morna who was barely two years old.

I have never seen a dog exult in snow like Morna did. Quite by accident she discovered the delight of tobogganing. Both dogs had inadvertently slid down a glassily frozen snowdrift. Most of us had done the same, myself not daring to ride my pony over such treacherous ground. We were about to move on again when we saw the golden cocker deliberately climbing back up over the snowdrift. When she reached the top she stretched out her front legs and slowly slid downwards again, her nose pointing upwards, an expression of sublime joy wreathing her face into a foolish kind of smile. She repeated the performance three or four times—

would probably have gone on doing it indefinitely if we had not had to move on across the pass.

The crossing of the Rohtang Pass was hardly eventful but it marked a momentous day in our travels, for at last we had been able to climb to the level of perpetual snow, or very near it. The pass itself, lying across a saddle between high mountains, is mainly free from snow throughout the warmer months. But from the top of the pass we had looked across to a tremendous wall of mountains, great jagged peaks rising to nineteen or twenty thousand feet, or more. They were the mountains of Lahoul and of Kashmir, of Spiti and Ladakh. We were looking at the peaks and ridges of the main Himalayan range, the same great range of mountains that extended far to the east—to the Se-La Range above the forests of Assam.

We were achieving what we had craved to do in Assam. We were going on to cross the inner passes that would lead us near the borders of Tibet.

## *Introduction to Lahoul*

**A**BOUT three thousand feet below the pass, on the farther side, we came to Khoksar, the first village in Lahoul.

To call Khoksar a village, or even a hamlet, is misleading. Such words call to mind a picture of cottages clustered round a green, or nestling among friendly hills and woods. Nothing could be farther from the unmitigated desolation of Khoksar.

It consisted of a huddle of flat-roofed houses that were barely distinguishable amongst the boulders, stones and rocks that lay tumbled over the floor of one of the most hostile looking valleys I have ever seen.

In its deep-cut bed below shelving, rock-strewn banks the Chandra river plunged and foamed, its muddy waters charging down a valley that looked so inhospitable, so utterly divorced from comfort and fertility, that one wondered what inducement could have persuaded anyone to build a village there.

From the jagged mountains of Spiti to the glaciers above the Chenab, more than thirty miles away, only two trees were visible from Khoksar—two lonely, wind-bent birches looking as much at home as they would be among the mountains of the moon. Here and there, where chattering mountain streams ran to join the racing waters of the Chandra, there were patches of mossy grass, with violas and marigolds shining in a tiny oasis of green.

High above the mountain walls of the valley drifts of snow sprawled downwards, clinging to sheltered slopes between buttresses of rock that bulged out above cliffs from which screes and shale poured down.

Yet in this desolate valley (where in winter the snow lies ten to twelve or more feet deep) somebody, a family, perhaps, or a

group of families, had built a village which they called home. A village that was built of the stones that belonged to the valley, its bleak, flat-topped houses seeming to have grown up out of the stony landscape.

Khoksar rest-house was a two-roomed house standing amongst giant boulders above the river bank.

All day long at Khoksar a bitter wind moaned down the valley, a wind that was moaning dismally when, tired and wet, we arrived at the bungalow. Already Khatm Mia and Kirit Ram were making the place comfortable, Kirit Ram preparing the botanical specimens to be dried in front of the fire.

We sent for the caretaker and made certain that no other visitors were expected that evening. He brought us the 'Bungalow Book', the book that has to be signed by all who use the Government rest-houses. Often these bungalow books are extremely amusing, containing comments by visitors dating sometimes from the last century. The last signature in the Khoksar book was of recent date and it was rather startling.

"Prince Peter of Greece" was the name we read. We decided that somebody had tried to be funny, and whoever he was he had not yet returned. We were liable to meet this 'joker' somewhere in Lahoul.

On our next day's journey we met a forest ranger (Heaven knows what forests he was ranging in that place) who told us that it was no 'joker' but the real Prince Peter of Greece who had lately passed that way. Naturally we were interested.

It seemed like old times to look forward again to a meeting with royalty, though a rather different kind of royalty, we guessed, from the seven kings of Rupa.

Meanwhile, after a late tea we walked down by the river to have a look at Khoksar village. We learnt later that the houses of Khoksar were typical of Lahoul, which has adopted its style from Tibet—or, more likely, brought its customs with it from Tibet. It is a style that pleases because it harmonizes with the steep, harsh lines of the landscape. The houses were rectangular in shape, wider at the base, gradually sloping inwards to a flat roof which might be two, three or even four storeys above the ground.

In such houses the ground floor is reserved for sheltering horses and cattle during the winter months, the family living in the upper floors.

As Khoksar in its summer looks uncompromisingly bleak it is hard to understand how the villagers exist in winter, when snow drifts pile up to roofs.

From what we learned later of Lahoulis, however, we guessed that to be snowbound for four or five months in Khoksar would not be too wearisome; at any rate for the men. They asked of life little more than endless leisure and enough to eat and drink. For all they were likely to care, the snow might go on piling up to the roof of the world as long as they were not expected to sweep it away.

Next morning, as we moved down the Chandra Valley, Khoksar was soon lost to sight, merged into the debris of rocks and boulders that lay below the screes.

All along that valley I found myself enthralled to see how the story of the mountains unfolded itself page by page recorded in the rocks or suddenly revealed by the scars of cataclysmic disaster. As our procession of pack animals moved ahead we could read as clearly as in a book the tales of calamity revealed by landslides that had torn away the face of mountains, or by sudden twists in the course of the river where it had been dammed and forced out of its usual channel by some tremendous obstruction.

We were told by a passing shepherd that more than a hundred years ago a glacier had moved downwards from its bed among the upper waters of the Chandra. The great mass had blocked the river till the tremendous weight of water behind it broke through the ice dam and hurled itself down the Chandra Valley, carrying away rocks and boulders and a whole village in its fury. Near Khoksar we had seen signs of this disaster, marks that showed where the river had risen fifty feet above its normal level.

Farther down the valley we picked our way over the rubble and mud of an enormous landslide that had ripped the face off a mountain spur, buried a village and poured thousands of tons of debris into the river, forcing the waters to sweep away seeking another channel.

Danger from landslides, danger from flood and danger from avalanche and glacier. Danger such as threatens any country that lies among high mountains. But there are not many countries where inhabited valleys lie above tree level, at ten thousand feet. As we moved down the Chandra valley we wondered more and more about the sort of people who dared to make their homes in such a hostile valley.

Sheer necessity may have been the only reason for the three villages that remained, such villages perhaps having evolved from the need for some sort of shelter for travellers when the valley is buried under its tremendous depth of snow. Later we were told that in the days of Jenghiz Khan Tartar invaders made their

way down from the passes through Kashmir and into this valley. Perhaps they had already lost their way trying to find an easier pass through to India. They may have hoped to reach the valley before winter came. The only certainty is that they were overtaken by winter and forced to shelter in rock caves where they died of cold and hunger while fearful blizzards swept victorious through the valley.

Proof of this disaster was found among the caves where weapons were discovered and identified as belonging to the days of Jenghiz Khan's campaigns six hundred years ago. These weapons are now preserved in the Thakur's castle at Gondla, the last village in the Chandra Valley.

'Thakur' was the title given to a local chieftain whose family lived in an imposing building at Gondla, a building which, from a distance, resembled a house built of cards. It had a square tower six storeys high rising above tiers of roofs that jutted out beyond the top of the lower storeys.

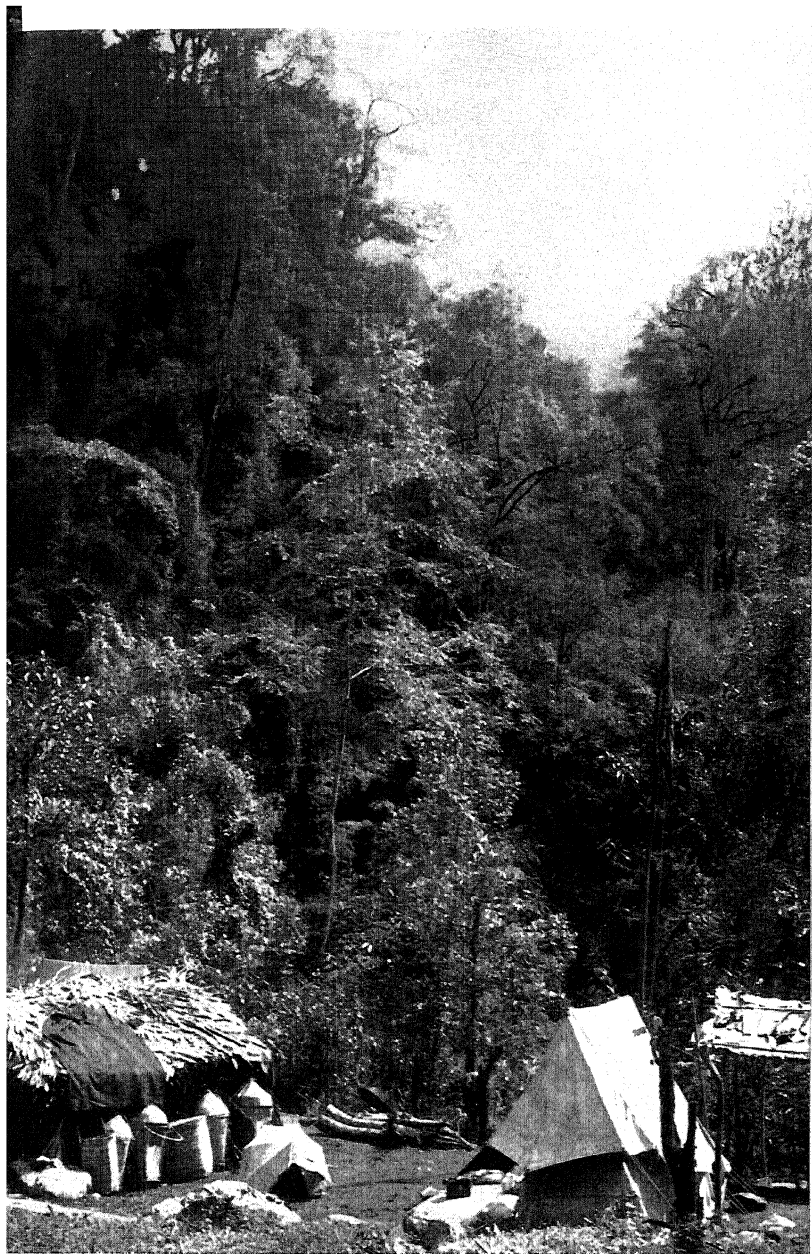
The Thakur took us to his house and showed us the weapons of Jenghiz Khan's legions. The weapons were housed in an upper room of the castle, a room kept as a museum.

When the winter snows begin to thaw the danger of avalanches threatens both sides of the Chandra Valley. On our leisurely journey towards Gondla we had the luck to witness a small sample of what at other times happens on a tremendous scale.

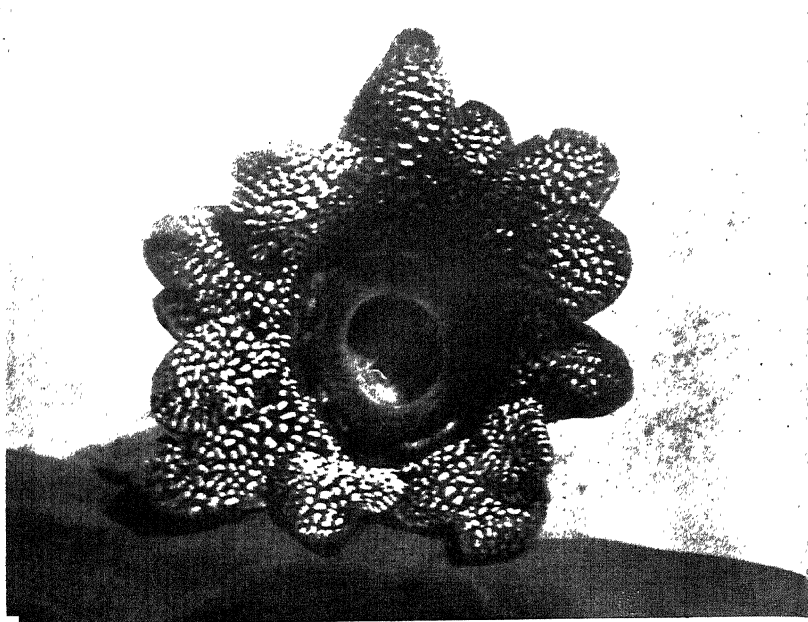
We had paused on the bridle track to marvel at the size and shape of crags carved by ice and weather into fantastic spires and turrets. One terrific mass of rock stood like a vast cathedral, its walls grooved into the likeness of gothic windows and buttresses. Its western end tapered to a spire seventeen thousand feet high. A spire that pierced the clouds that moved in rags of mist blown across snowfields soaring up behind.

It was difficult to take our eyes away from the terrifying beauty of the great cathedral rock, yet we could not help turning to look at the snout of a particularly evil-looking glacier that seemed to be snarling at us from a deep cleft that hid the rest of its course behind a wall of rock. We had seen that every now and again little drifts of snow or ice kept falling from the glacier, as though it not only snarled but sniffed at us contemptuously.

Suddenly it snarled in earnest. Liz and Morna had growled before we were aware of anything. Then we heard it, too. We heard a rumbling noise like distant thunder, a noise that swelled and filled the valley. And we watched while a mass of snow gathered speed as it moved across the glacier, slipping towards



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the massed cliffs of black ice that marked the snout of the glacier.

Then the whole valley shook with the thunder of the avalanche. Hundreds of tons of snow and ice crashed on to a ledge of rock six hundred feet below, the whole huge mass bursting like a bomb, veiling crag and mountain in the smoke of its explosion.

As the smoke cleared away we saw the rest of the avalanche sliding to the rim of the rock ledge—then swiftly over, dropping another six hundred feet till it fell on the screes and came creaming down towards the river, leaving behind a trail of debris to record another moment in the story of the mountains.

I have read many accounts of journeys to Lahoul and to Ladakh. So many people have travelled there, and so many of them, like myself have felt the urge to write about such travels. But most of the writers appeared to have skipped, skied or skidded through to Kyelang, the capital of Lahoul, without noticing the splendour of the Chandra Valley, the cathedral rock or the Thakur's castle, or the cliffs that rise ten thousand feet sheer above the village of Gondla. It is certain that the Lahoulis, like all the hill-people we had known, had no appreciation of the beauty of their mountains.

But after Gondla even we began to find the journey and the mountains tedious. The road from Gondla to Kyelang took us deeper into the mountains, following up the course of the Bhaga River after its junction with the Chandra.

It was a weary, dusty road winding round long steep spurs of mountains that were dull and featureless. There was nothing—no streams or waterfalls, no crags, not even a glacier or snow peak to break the monotony of seemingly endless miles of twisting road.

I hated that last stage of our journey. I could find nothing of interest in it and I railed at the blinding sunlight beating down on us and glaring up from the micaceous shale of the track. That blazing hot shale caused blisters on the dogs' feet; they limped and drooped, and not till we were close to Kyelang could we find so much as a runnel of water to quench their raging thirst.

Despite the parched barrenness of everything, my husband and Kirit Ram managed to collect a number of botanical rarities. One of these at any rate was spectacular enough to appeal to me. This was the *Eremurus* flower whose long, slender, poker-like blooms grew as much as three or four feet tall. On one steep mountain slope these flowers were in such profusion that the place was massed with a cream-yellow froth of bloom. Too late to test it, we learnt that the leaves of *Eremurus* form a delicious vegetable.

When at last we neared Kyelang, with its terraced fields

scalloped out of the barren hills and its flat-roofed houses clustered amongst poplars and willows, we felt as though we were returning to civilization after months of wandering in the wilderness. We felt indeed that we were approaching a most progressive place as we passed the court house and the school, the post office, three shops and the headquarters of the Moravian Mission.

From the distant curves of the road Kyelang had looked neat, fresh and inviting. The houses had looked like white cubes dappled with sunlight that shone on the round shapes of pollarded willows, and shimmered on poplars shafting up like spears.

There was nothing neat, nor fresh, nor inviting about Kyelang when you reached the narrow cobbled streets that climbed and twisted between the houses.

The cobbles were glued together by a sticky ooze of evil-smelling mud and sewage. The trim white houses (fascinating in the rigid simplicity of their design) were drab and dingy tenements breathing out fumes of rancid butter which mingled with the stink of decaying garbage, human filth and the pervading stuffy smell of unwashed woollen garments.

Scarcity of water in their country, and the fierce cold of winter, undoubtedly gives the Lahoulis reason for washing neither their bodies nor their clothes, and certainly not their houses nor their streets. Despite the enormous amount of snow that falls during the winter the mountains of Lahoul are, during the summer months, almost as parched and barren as the rocks of Aden. From the highest peaks where the snow lies unmelted throughout the year long slopes of scree and scanty grass drop steeply to the valley, so steeply that water from melting snow is carried away too swiftly, leaving the mountain sides smooth and bare, monotonously bleak and dreary.

That was our first impression of the place; closer knowledge did nothing to mitigate it. Yet even though on this visit we spent ten days in the place we liked it well enough to wish we might return—provided we did not have to share the two-roomed rest-house with other visitors. We thought that if we came that way again we might bring a tent.

The idea came to us when a British subaltern turned up next day at the rest-house. He was entitled to occupy the other room but rather than disturb us he pitched his tent a few yards from the house. We were extremely grateful for his consideration.

To be confined to one room, eating, sleeping and living with a botanist and his specimens as well as all our stores and the dogs, produces immediate conditions of overcrowding.

If there is a fire it is fenced round with botanical presses and papers that have to be dried out. Every piece of furniture gets covered with ragged-looking plants—roots and leaves and earth and all. Booklets of botanical labels get their strings tied up in everything. And, in this instance, the botanist concerned liked to have 'everything handy', including a variety of books and newspapers, maps and pens, a bottle of ink (which was upset more than once)—and an enormous mug of tea.

We were, therefore, greatly obliged to the young man with the tent, so much so that we invited him to share our meals with us. This offer turned out to be the best return we could have made for his niceness.

After crossing the Rohtang Pass our usual camp diet had to be changed. The cheap Indian fowl was not obtainable in Lahoul and thence onwards we lived on sheep. The custom was to buy a whole sheep (which was humanely butchered and then jointed by Khatm Mia), the meat of which did not go bad in that dry climate beyond the reach of flies.

We used to cook all the offal, except the tripe, at once and keep it for the dogs. By boiling it up every day this kind of hot-pot kept them going for nearly a week. The rest of the meat we shared with Khatm Mia and the porters. Not with Kirit Ram, who was a vegetarian.

Our young friend in the tent had bought himself half a sheep at Khoksar, and when he arrived in Kyelang he hung the last of his joints in a tree outside his tent. During the night a large Tibetan dog came and removed the joint. He was gnawing the last of the bones next morning.

Meanwhile we went calling. Not exactly what we had expected to do in that remote valley, but we were anxious to meet Mr. Peter of the Moravian Mission. We had heard about this remarkable man, and we knew that he could give us more details about Lahoul than anyone else—in the world, perhaps.

We also called on Prince Peter of Greece who had rented a house in Kyelang, being interested in the custom of polyandry that prevailed in Lahoul. Anything concerning the customs of the country was of interest to us and it was an amazing piece of luck that we chanced to visit Kyelang in time to meet two men both experts on their subject.

We found Mr. Peter and his sister at tea, and we came immediately under the spell of this astounding man.

At that time the mission was being boycotted by the lamas. Miss Peter had only recently arrived in the country, and when

she joined her brother it was to find themselves without any servants at all. Not a soul in Kyelang would do anything for them. Even in the best houses of Kyelang (and the Mission House was quite the nicest) the sanitary arrangements were of the usual primitive kind that we had known in Assam. The Peters were obliged to manage for themselves, carrying out and disposing of the sewage which, in the ordinary way, is a job done by 'sweepers' who are wont to take an astounding pride in their repulsive task.

I can't imagine that either Mr. Peter or his sister felt keen on such work. But they did it uncomplainingly, with an incredible number of other jobs.

Apart from growing their own fruit and vegetables, they gathered and dug for them, bringing them to the house when they weren't supplying them to Prince Peter and ourselves.

They did their own cooking and housework, tended their garden and the little mission cemetery. And Mr. Peter killed and jointed their own sheep and pigs, Miss Peter making delicious sausages from the pigs.

As to mission work, there was precious little they could do. There had never been many converts throughout the whole history of the mission, a matter of about eighty years. But now that the mission was boycotted I do not know that there were any converts at all.

Added to all this, Mr. Peter was a Tibetan scholar. He could speak and write Tibetan fluently, and he spoke the Lahouli dialect as well. He was intensely interested in every aspect of Lamaism, though naturally bitter about the corruption of the monasteries. And their hostility to his work.

A day or two later we went to tea with Prince Peter in the house which, though we did not know it then, we would occupy three years later.

Only ten days in Kyelang, including the day of our arrival and the day we left the place. And mostly I remember an exchange of social calls. It was no more than a brief introduction to Lahoul, a short rest between two journeys, with a chance for the botanists to add to their collection.

And then, on our last day, another British couple arrived at the rest-house. I can remember nothing about them except that they were extremely nice. But the congestion in those two tiny rooms was awful. We were thankful that it was our last night in Kyelang. Nothing much had happened. Nothing to compare with the pageantry and adventure of the old touring days in Assam. But the little that we had seen made us want to come back, if such a chance should ever come to us.

When we left Kyelang next morning there was trouble with the porters. That is the sort of statement I have avoided all through these tales of our travels. Too many travel books and notes on travel start every other chapter with an account of 'trouble with the porters'. Such 'trouble' is a common incident of travel, too common to be of interest. I allude to it here only because the trouble at Kyelang led to an incident at Khoksar, and another on the Rohtang Pass when we crossed it again on our return journey.

Nearly always on our travels we allowed the porters a good half-hour's start on ourselves, for we had learnt long ago that if we went ahead we soon lost sight of them and arrived at our destination without food or furniture, or change of clothing. But though we tried to get away early from Kyelang we could not budge the Lahouli porters. They were engaged in an almighty row, and we got tired of waiting while the mules stamped and kicked, the men quarrelled, and our luggage remained unloaded in the muddy streets of Kyelang.

We walked on ahead with the dogs for about a mile, then sat down by the roadside and waited. We waited for an hour. There was no sign of them. So my husband went back to see what had happened. The dogs and I continued to wait.

Another half-hour had passed before we saw Khatm Mia approaching, followed by Kirit Ram. Not far behind them came the pack animals and their drovers. They were a sulky looking collection of Lahoulis in charge of some kind of a lama. Last of all came my husband, who seemed to have assumed the role of drover-in-chief. He was urging them on with curses in many languages.

I pulled myself up from the roadside while the dogs ran to greet their master. Giving the baggage time to get well ahead of us, I listened to the story of the trouble.

Apparently the row that was in full swing when we left Kyelang had worked up to murderous dimensions. Not one of our belongings had been loaded when my husband arrived on the scene.

Neither Khatm Mia nor Kirit Ram had been able to make any impression. Neither of them spoke the local language; anyway, they could not have made their voices heard above the din. The main cause of the trouble had been the lama who was supposed to be in charge of the gang. If he wasn't an unfrocked lama he ought to have been. Even at that early hour he was aggressively drunk. My husband said that the din and the con-

fusion were indescribable. The mules had caught the infection and were only slightly less unmanageable than the men. The only thing to be done was to grab the quarrelling Lahoulis, more or less rub their noses in the luggage, at the same time starting to load it up oneself. Within about twenty minutes everybody was ready for the road.

And then the mule that was laden with the lamps and the oil shook off its load and bolted into the distance. Two lamps survived the battering. They were dented into shapes that made them look as drunk as the lama.

By the time that we were all on the road again the sun was well up, the brassy sun that we could have avoided to some extent if we had started as early as we had hoped.

But now it was nearly ten o'clock, and the shadeless, shaly track to Gondla was burning hot beneath our feet. Also, Liz was flagging. All her usual energy seemed to have deserted the bull terrier. She lagged dejectedly behind. It became obvious that the old dog was feeling the height and the heat—or something. Obvious, anyway, that she could not tackle the long marches that lay ahead of us. I suggested that we might try to induce her to ride on my pony in front of me.

Being, as I have said, no horsewoman, I always had my pony saddled with a cushion and several blankets before I was hoisted up. I now folded one of the blankets and held it in front of me, grasping the ends so that it formed a kind of hammock. Liz was placed in this and settled down immediately, accepting her position as quietly as if it had been her own bed, or mine. In this way we covered the four marches of our return journey, Liz perfectly content to lie in the blanket held in front of me. My nice, staid pony accepted the additional burden without comment of any kind.

Poor old Liz! We thought it was just old age. We never suspected the illness that must have been making her life an intolerable burden.

It was when we again reached Khoksar rest-house that the 'trouble with the porters' flamed up into the worst row we ever heard.

We had gone to bed before the row began and were lying there listening to the incessant roar of the Chandra River. Suddenly above the voice of the river we heard the brawl of an infernal row going on behind the bungalow. It was as though the rocks and stones of Khoksar had come to life and were hurling obscenities at one another.

Infuriated by the disturbance, my husband got up and strode out into the night. He found every one of the porters and the drovers yelling, bawling and cursing, and the lama, fighting drunk by now, cursing louder than all.

Khatm Mia and Kirit Ram were powerlessly trying to quell the riot. An Indian youth (from a Christian college in Lahore) was admonishing the brawlers with quotations from the Bible. The earnest young Christian was staying the night in the serai behind the rest-house.

Alarmed by the sound of battle, I crept to one of the back doors to watch the scene. Morna came with me and yapped but Liz remained asleep on my bed. Never have I listened to anything that could be so aptly described as a bawling match. When it comes to bawling my husband can produce a volume of sound liable to out-bellow the most infuriated bull.

He did so now. No use trying to bawl at the Lahoulis in their own language, for he did not speak that one. So he bawled in his native Irish. Khatm Mia bawled in Assamese and Hindustani, and Kirit Ram remonstrated in Garwahli. The drunken lama bawled in Tibetan, and the chorus bellowed in Lahouli. By sheer force of volume the Assamese and the Irish oaths won. The lama (the root of the trouble, though we never knew why) was chased into his lair where he fell into a drunken stupor from which he had not stirred when we left next morning.

The ensuing peace was marvellous. Even the moaning howl of the Chandra River sounded like a lullaby before we fell asleep.

The final chapter of the bawling match was written on top of the Rohtang Pass next day.

When we reached the top of the pass Liz and I dismounted to walk among the alpine meadows which were now ablaze in the fullness of their glory. Already the botanists were searching among masses of primula and potentilla and gentians. And while we munched sandwiches and waited for them we were caught up by the Christian youth we had met the night before.

We both went up to greet him, offering him coffee from our thermos. My husband hoped that he had not been too much disturbed by the row in the night.

The youth looked reproachfully at us as he spoke.

"Sir," he said, "it was not the noise that upset me. But I must take exception to the vile oaths."

And he turned away from us. He was stiff with disapproval.

It was the end of a chapter. The last chapter of our first visit to Lahoul.

## End of Another Chapter

IT seems odd that though we lived for five years in Dehra Dun, of those five years I can find nothing of interest to write about—except for our two visits to Lahoul. There were, of course, plenty of interesting things that happened, interesting and amusing. But mostly they had no place in my story of forest road and mountain track.

Since I played no games, neither danced nor rode, never went to the club, possessed no radio, and seldom went to the cinema, people might well wonder what on earth I *did* do.

My husband had his office work and, of course, his botany. We had a lovely house (the running of which took up a fair amount of my time) and a beautiful garden—but we loathed gardening. And we had the dogs, always my main source of exercise and of entertainment. We also had a good deal of entertaining to do. But it doesn't sound like a very busy life.

So—what *did* I do to while away the time?

Never in all my life have I had time enough to do all that I want to do. That which I want to do most—writing and drawing—necessitates silence and solitude, luxuries that were rare in Dehra Dun.

I wrote three unpublished books while we were there. The time spent on them must have occupied the greater part of at least four years, especially since (unless I ever had the luck to achieve publication) I was under a vow of silence about my writing. I just could not stand the sort of questions asked by those who could not understand, those who assume that to write a book and to get it published are the same thing.

Writing was my ambition, but to advertise the fact was (for



me) a confession of failure—unless I ever achieved publication. So my writing had to be done in secret, which added to the difficulties of the work.

Another job that kept me pretty busy was the result of my decision to try to learn to speak Hindustani properly. Up till then I had been able only to speak the language sketchily and badly. In Assam it had been useless to learn good Hindustani as it was not the language of the country. But in Dehra most of our friends were Indian, and many of their wives could not speak English. I longed to be able to talk to them in their own language. You cannot claim to 'know' a people unless you speak their language.

So I obtained the services of a 'munshi' and every day for eight months I talked with him for an hour or so. Eventually I was able to speak pretty fluently, but (as had happened in former days when my husband had mastered a new language) as soon as I found myself able to talk and joke easily in Hindustani we were moved from Dehra Dun. But before that happened the pattern of our life was beginning to change again.

To begin with, not long after our return from Lahoul, Khatm Mia left us. He was reluctant to go, and we were bitterly sorry to lose him. He was almost our last link with travelling days in Assam. But Dehra was a long way from his Sylheti home, and family troubles called him away. We assured him that we would always find a niche for him if we ever met again. And then—the final link with the old days snapped. Liz became desperately ill.

Throughout these records of our travels I have tried not to let the dogs obtrude too much. Right at the beginning I have explained how they, as much as all our friends, were an essential part of the life we led. Until now Liz had outlasted all our dogs (except Morna), and she had become a sort of mascot in our lives. More than that—a symbol of the life we loved, of a way of life that was passing from the world.

It was June 1938 when we discovered that she was seriously ill. At that time there was no vet in Dehra who could diagnose the trouble. There was only one chance. That was to take her to Delhi, about a hundred and twenty miles away, where first-class vets existed.

My husband could not leave his office work, so Liz and I made the journey alone, save for our bulky Mussulman driver (may his tribe increase).

I had never been to Delhi before. When I got into the car that morning both my husband and I knew that we each knew that there was little hope of Liz surviving the long journey in the

burning heat of June. But we had to give her the chance. She was lifted in and laid on the seat beside me, and our new bearer, a dear old man whom we named 'Sennacherib', handed in a flask of brandy, a flask of ice and some Brand's Essence with which I was to try and keep the dog alive until we got to Delhi.

Most of us, in our day, have experienced more than a few 'nightmare journeys'. Millions have endured journeys that don't bear thinking about. To many it would seem ridiculous nonsense to describe that journey to Delhi (to save the life of a dying dog) as a nightmare. Better perhaps to call it an unpleasant dream.

The heat, of course, was awful. And the dust. From time to time I rubbed Liz's head with ice which seemed to revive her a little. Every hour the driver stopped the car and helped me feed her on sips of brandy and chicken essence. Most of the time she lay inert, her tongue hanging out, her breath coming in rapid gasps. I expected her to die at any moment.

And then forty miles short of Delhi the car stopped dead. The fan belt had broken.

For half an hour we waited in the dust of the road while the driver struggled to repair the trouble. There was little he could do. Yet somehow or other he persuaded the car to move on—stopping and jerking, and tinkering with the fan, and again moving on until we reached a garage.

'Now,' I thought, 'fifteen minutes at most and we'll be able to speed on to Delhi.'

The garage mechanic inspected the trouble, then told us it would take three to four hours to repair.

"It *can't*!" I told him. "I've got a dying dog here and I've got to get into Delhi. At once!"

The man gave me a look that was a mixture of pity and contempt. A dying dog? What did a dog matter? Weren't they dying all over the place among the garbage of villages and towns? Why not put the dog by the roadside and leave it to die? Like a thousand other dogs.

The driver turned his back upon the mechanic, and got back into the car. With a word of reassurance to me he ground his foot upon the starter and sent the car speeding noisily along the road.

If ever a man earned the tip which he afterwards got, that driver did. Knowing nothing about cars myself I have no idea how he performed the miracle. I remember only that he drove the car furiously for a mile or so until he stopped at a roadside well. He seemed to give the car a drink. Then he again helped me

to feed Liz. Once more we were off, driving madly till water was again obtainable for the car.

In this way—stopping and charging onwards for two hours or more—we drove at last between the girders of an iron bridge. And into Delhi.

In the hot dusk of a June twilight I looked upon Delhi, seeing it through a dust-fog that shrouded the city in melancholy.

That impression of melancholy never lifted even on the happier days when we visited Delhi again. I never saw it without being conscious of a brooding sadness.

Surrounded by the ruins of older cities, itself built upon ruins and full of ruined remains, Delhi has always seemed to me to be haunted by memories of battle, murder and suffering. The newness and the splendour of New Delhi enhance the feeling of oppression that hovers over everything. If ever there were a city where the 'very stones cry out' that city is Delhi.

Steering our way that evening through the streets of Old Delhi I was steeling myself to adjure the vet *not* to try to save Liz. I was certain now that there was no hope for her. There was only enough life in her to enable her to gasp continually. I felt myself unable to endure much more.

At about six in the evening the car turned into the yard of the veterinary hospital.

Carrying Liz in my arms, I got out and walked towards an old Sikh who was coming to meet me.

There was something about that old man (his name was Sewa Singh) which inspired immediate confidence. I still had no hope for Liz, but something of the calm confidence of Sewa Singh flowed into me as I placed the dog in his arms. A second ago I had been all strung up, terrified lest I make a mess of what I had to say to him.

Now I heard myself speaking without a tremor, telling him that I wished him to give the lethal dose which seemed the only treatment possible.

"First," he said, "we will see what is the trouble."

I can hear his voice now—calm and soothing (like the old cook's) as he placed Liz on a table and immediately started issuing orders and doing things for her.

While temperatures were taken, pulse counted, blood-slides made, and cooling medicines administered, I sat on the edge of the table, one hand caressing Liz. And then, just when she most needed me, I fainted. Swooned away like a Victorian heroine.

The next thing I knew was that I was stretched out on a

string bed in the vet's yard, a crowd of anxious Indians trying to restore me. Sal volatile was produced. Someone suggested burnt feathers. Ice was laid on my head. The driver appeared with the remains of Liz's brandy.

To please them I accepted every remedy (the mixture nearly made me sick), but anxiety for Liz restored me faster than anything. The vet kept saying:

"Do not mind about the dog. She will be taken care of." She was. Sewa Singh saved her life. Apparently she had tick fever, the worst instance of it that Sewa Singh had ever dealt with. Yet he saved her.

I left her in his care for two days. I stayed at an hotel in Old Delhi, and every two hours that saintly old man telephoned to tell me of her progress. On the evening of the third day, after the worst heat had given way to nightfall, Liz, the driver and I returned to Dehra Dun.

The old dog lived, well and happily, for nearly another year. When once again she began to droop and to find life difficult we agreed that it would be cruel to try to induce her to live longer.

I am glad to think that it was from the hands of her own master and mistress that she took, as calmly as if it had been a biscuit, the overdose from which she never woke.

Three months later the world had burst into war.

And Morna had produced six black puppies. We kept one and named him 'Jasper'.

## Return to Kyelang

TO try to write about our first two and a half years of the war makes me feel stupefied with frustration—as helpless and frustrated as we both felt over our total inability to do any of those things we felt we should be doing, and *could* have done if we had been at home.

During the months of the ‘phoney war’ it wasn’t quite so bad. Nobody was able to do much then, and the frightful suffering of later years had not begun. Yet even in those days we could not believe that my husband would not be sent to work more vital than that of a forest botanist.

We thought that if we went home on leave we might be able to do something. But home leave was not allowed. My husband asked to be allowed to retire. He saw himself as a Home Guard or a fire watcher—as anything but a forest botanist. He was not allowed to retire. No, his ‘services were more useful’ where he was. The war would not come to India (so they said), but India could help in many ways. The Forest Department in particular was important. There was going to be an enormous demand for timber and for all forest products. How could the Forest Department carry on without the advice of their scientific staff? All of which was sound reasoning. Except the idea that the war could not come to India. Sound reasoning that made us feel rebellious. Since we could not go home and could not get into the war we asked leave to go again to Lahoul. Oh, yes, that was all right. Of course we might go to Lahoul. Why not? It wouldn’t make any difference to the troops sitting behind the Maginot Line.

Then came the invasion of Norway, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands, and the Battle of the Bulge.

Those frightful weeks came at the time when India wilts and droops beneath the hottest suns of all her year. The shade temperature in Dehra was 112 degrees, and I remember one awful afternoon when the stillness of the heat seemed unbearable. Out of doors everything was obscured by a dust-fog as melancholy as that which brooded over Delhi. Unable to settle to anything, I moved about the house making sure that not a chink of door or window was open anywhere. One's only hope of comfort was to try to keep the heat out, leaving oneself alone in the house. Alone and chafing at the thought of things in France.

The servants had all retired to their own quarters for their usual afternoon rest, and Morna and her son, Jasper, were asleep on the floor of my shuttered bedroom. Gradually the room became darker and I wondered if a prayed-for storm were coming. I looked outside only to see the dust-fog thickening to darkness. A dust-storm would do little to relieve the heat. It would mainly increase the discomfort.

Then the rain came. And the thunder, and the hail. It was without exception the worst storm I have ever known.

I am always careful to assure people that, after a great many years abroad, I have only once known a storm that was worse than the worst of its kind in Britain. That was the storm I have ever since associated with the Battle of the Bulge.

Within ten minutes the temperature had dropped thirty degrees. The noise was so appalling that both dogs were shivering with fear. I sat on my bed thinking:

'Now I know what the din of battle is like.'

Later, when he was able to get back from his office, my husband confirmed this. He said he had never heard anything like it since the days of Flanders mud and carnage.

The continual banging of hailstones on the roof was like machine-gun fire at close quarters. The bellowing, splitting crack of thunder was like a full-scale attack by all the biggest guns and high explosives ever used.

I had opened the shutters of my room. I could not believe that the hailstones were real. I had read and heard (and seen jokes in *Punch*) about 'hailstones as big as billiard balls'. Until that day I had regarded such accounts as travellers' tales; I never bothered to believe them.

But now, right in front of my eyes, hailstones of that fantastic size were hurtling down, ricocheting off the ground, battering the roof and, as we discovered later, smashing windows, destroying crops and trees, killing cattle and human beings.

Already our garden was white with hail—ridiculous hail, unbelievable balls of ice shot out of the hidden clouds.

I don't suppose that the storm lasted for much more than half an hour. But the damage done was terrible. On the north side of the Forest Research Institute, an enormous building, every window had been broken. The damage to crops and cattle was irreparable. That storm was indeed symbolic of the catastrophe that was overwhelming the world.

Not that we needed any symbols to bring it home to us. What we read in the papers and listened to on the radio (we had purchased one at last) was enough. More than ever it seemed incredible that we might remain much longer among the comforts of Dehra Dun. In any event it seemed all wrong to go so far off the map as Lahoul. So we cancelled the arrangements that we had made and remained where we were. We remained there waiting and wondering, gradually forcing ourselves to accept the fact that we were not needed for anything more urgent than what we were doing at the moment.

By 1941 we were resigned to having to wait. But the attitude of Japan made us pretty sure that our chance must come soon. Meanwhile, we went back to Lahoul.

This time our 'family party' consisted of ourselves and 'Sennacherib', the old man who more or less combined the duties of Khatm Mia and the old cook, also Kirit Ram. And Morna and Jasper.

Before crossing the Rohtang Pass we stayed for a month at Manali, living in a tent at one of the orchard guest-houses in that lovely valley. The Kulu Valley is famous for its orchards, the sort we had once dreamed of planting in Rupa and Shergaon.

That month in Manali (without colds and with two healthy dogs) gave us time to enjoy the beauty of the place. Time, too, for Kirit Ram and my husband to make a really good collection of the local flora. Manali was so lovely that it is tempting to go into raptures about it, to embark on a wealth of description of its lovely glades and streams, of the crags above the forest, and of the grove of giant deodars where an ancient wooden temple rose tier upon tilted tier like the branches of the vast, ancient trees.

But Manali was only a halt on our journey to Kyelang and beyond. We were obliged to stay there longer than we had intended as the snow lay late on the pass that year; we had to wait until the first shepherds came through with the news that it was at last safe to cross.

No need to describe again the journey from Manali to Kyelang. It seemed even lovelier than we remembered, dream-like in its remoteness from nagging thoughts of war. Only Sennacherib looked warlike (in a bygone manner), riding his pony as if he were leading the Assyrians into battle. He rode the whole way from Manali to Kyelang, not even dismounting while the pony slipped and slithered on the snowdrifts of the pass.

We met no travellers on the way, and the only incident I remember occurred at Khoksar. Somewhere on our journey to Manali, more than a month ago, we had packed the remains of a boiled fowl into a thermos container, intending to keep it for the dogs. We forgot all about it. At Khoksar we needed the thermos so I opened it. It exploded immediately. The smell nearly shot us all into the raging Chandra River.

Sennacherib washed and deodorized the flask. But nothing could deodorize the cork. I scrubbed it in disinfectant; I washed it and boiled it and dried it in the sun. Finally, we baked it in an oven. The smell survived everything. We had to throw the flask away. So we bought a sheep and moved on down the valley, looking forward to what we guessed was likely to be a really pleasant end to the journey when we reached Kyelang.

Instead of having to share the rest-house with other travellers at Kyelang we were going to live in a house of our own. We had in fact arranged to rent for two months the house which had been occupied by Prince Peter of Greece when last we came that way. We considered that what had been good enough for a prince should be good enough for us.

But our house was not ready for us when we arrived in Kyelang; for the first two nights we had to stay at the rest-house. After one look at the house we feared that we might never get into it at all. It was so encrusted with dirt that we were hardly able to open the doors.

Our landlord, whom we never met, was an Indian doctor who had married a Lahouli wife and had built for her this large house overlooking Kyelang. After building the house the doctor went away and married another wife who refused to live in Lahoul. Where the forsaken wife lived I do not know, but she kept her clothes stored all over the closely locked lower rooms of the house. By peering through the dirt of the downstairs windows we could see the garments, drab as pledges in a third-rate pawnshop, hanging from hooks in the ceiling.

The upper storey of the house was surrounded by a glassed-in veranda, a place that winked and flashed in the sunlight,





Manali—Wooden Temple and Giant Deodars

*Drawing by the Author*



Khoksar

making it the most conspicuous house in Kyelang. We named it the 'Crystal Palace'.

I suppose it was because the house belonged to a doctor that we had expected to find it reasonably clean. Anyway, we were wrong. It was filthy. I doubt if anyone had even waved a duster at it from a distance since the days when it had been occupied by Prince Peter.

We arranged for a strong man from the village to spend the next day purifying the upper storey. The lower floor (with the landlady's garments) remained locked throughout our stay in Kyelang.

The next morning we sent Sennacherib along with half a gallon of phenyl and some old rags to enable the strong man to do his work as it should be done. In the evening we visited the house to see how the work had gone on. Long before we reached the rocky path that led to the Crystal Palace we could sniff the fragrance of phenyl in the air. As we climbed the rickety stairs to the veranda we met the last trickles of disinfectant sadly draining away from the flooded upper floor.

To reach our part of the house you had to push your way through a trap door at the top of the stairs, and as we rose through the opening we saw in front of us a bedroom door wide open. In the bedroom stood a rather dreadful bed. On the bed (or all that was visible of it) was a pair of mud-caked feet.

Only last night we had shuddered at the discovery of blood-stains on the door of that very room. Now we shrank back, shuddering again. Here, it seemed, was the explanation of the blood-stains. We had found *the body*.

We knew that murder was fairly common in Lahoul; we recalled the murderous row among the drovers and porters at Khoksar. We only wondered to whom we should report the matter. Mr. Peter and his sister were no longer there; the mission was closed for as long as the war might last. There was no police station in Kyelang and, so far, the only official buildings—the post office and the court house—were also closed indefinitely.

And then with a braying yawn the body came to life. It was the body of the strong man from the village, a strong man exhausted by his first, and probably last, experience of cleaning a house in Kyelang.

We banished the bed to an outhouse and next day moved into the Crystal Palace.

Without our friends at the mission, Kyelang seemed just that much bleaker than before. The little mission house was abandoned

and deserted, yet it still contained the whole of Mr. Peter's library, his furniture and most of his belongings.

For a short while after the outbreak of war he and his sister had been interned. They had left the mission without having time to pack up much more than what they needed for their journey. We had heard about this while we were in Manali, and we had shared the indignation of their friends in the valley. It was only another instance of the innumerable blunders of wartime officialdom but to those of us who knew the Peters it was an unforgivable piece of stupidity. I am thankful to say that we did have a chance to see them both again. While we were living at the Crystal Palace Mr. Peter and his sister were living and working at the Canadian mission down at Palampur. We saw them there on our return journey. Whether they ever returned to Kyelang I do not know. Nor do I know whether the mission is still working there. The last news we had (a few months ago) was that Mr. and Miss Peter were in Lahore. Having known them in Lahoul, I cannot picture them loving life in Lahore.

We missed the Peters greatly. They could have taught us so much more of the country than we were likely to find out for ourselves. We managed, however, to get about and see far more of Lahoul than we had ever dared to hope.

From the botanists' point of view the main attraction was to be found in the alpine meadows, and for these we were conveniently situated at the Crystal Palace. Barely seven minutes' walk took us up to a great meadow slope, whence we had a superb view up and down the valleys.

From there we could see clearly how the Bhaga River had cleaved for itself a bed far below the terraced floor of the valley, the drop to the river bed being cut off sheer and deep as a crevasse, looking like a fissure in the earth's crust. Far below us the river coiled like a snake, twisting in and out, rounding spur after spur of barren hill, spurs that swept down in long unbroken lines from rugged, snow-patched peaks eighteen or nineteen thousand feet in height.

Apart from the towering peaks and the glaciers, the valley of the Bhaga might have been a large-scale version of some steep-walled, lonely valley among the Scottish hills.

Except for the wild roses spraying over the rocks, and the flower-starred slopes of the alpine meadows, the scenery of Lahoul was mostly oppressively full of awe.

Living at the Crystal Palace, we had time to absorb every aspect of that awful scenery. Besides the commanding view

from the veranda of the house, we were obliged every day to walk up a hill path to tell the time. This was necessary because two days after our arrival in Kyelang all our watches, including Sennacherib's, had stopped. Impossible to get them mended locally; we had to tell the time by a rock, taking with us an old alarm clock that gained fifteen minutes or so in twenty-four hours. The rock stood on the hills above the monastery facing us across the Bhaga Valley. From a certain point on our path (a spot where two enormous *chortens* were built beneath an overhanging cliff) we would watch until the sun glinted on the extreme tip of the distant rock, throwing a shadow that seemed to point towards ourselves. When that happened we knew it was midday. One or other of us, therefore, took a daily walk to the *chortens* in order to tell the time. And from there we usually went on and up across the meadows that overlooked the curves of the Bhaga River.

It did not need more than a glance to convince us of what we had been told, namely, that as a water supply the Bhaga flowed too deeply hidden below the valley to be of much use for anything—except the disposal of dead bodies.

I think Mr. Peter had told us that. But from other sources also we had learnt something about the disposal of the dead in countries like Lahoul.

According to Lamaistic teaching, the body, having parted from the soul, must be returned to one of the four elements—earth, fire, air or water. To return the body to earth is not usual in these regions, very likely because of the difficulty of breaking up the hard and often frozen soil. Cremation is not easy either in countries where fuel is always scarce, as in Lahoul and Tibet. In Tibet the body is most often 'returned to air'—a ceremony depicted by the only picture which adorned the walls of the Crystal Palace. The picture showed a lama dismembering a corpse, the bones of which had to be broken up before the remains were fed to the vultures and the ravens—for aerial disposal. The law of gravitation presumably does not apply to the waste products of these birds.

In Lahoul dead bodies were usually returned to water, the mad fury of such rivers as the Chandra and the Bhaga being guaranteed to pulverize dismembered corpses. This is not to imply that Lahoulis would be worried by the presence of a corpse or two in their drinking water. For its main water supply Lahoul had to depend on glaciers and the snowdrifts that lie unmelted through the summer among the higher peaks.

Kyelang was not always the capital of Lahoul. The former

capital stood on the side of a hill facing Kyelang across the Bhaga's deep crevasse. The life of this village had depended entirely on a stream that trickled from a far off drift of snow high above the valley. There was no glacier near enough to feed the smallest channel, so that when three mild winters followed one another even the higher snowdrifts melted away. Consequently the former capital of the country had to be abandoned except for a few villagers who clung to their old homes. When we crossed the Bhaga to visit the monastery we saw them making long journeys to fetch water from the monastery stream, fully a mile away.

We wondered what induced them to remain in their half-deserted village. Was it a sentimental affection for the old home? It did not seem likely. It could hardly have been due to unwillingness to abandon their few waterless fields. They may have been compelled to live there in order to work for the monastery.

Or they may have been too lazy to build themselves new houses on the Kyelang side of the river. The influence of the monastery and Lahouli laziness were the most likely factors.

Only a few days in Kyelang were enough to prove to us that Lahoulis are a shiftless, thriftless people, content to muddle along scratching a harsh existence out of their barren, stony mountains.

In those days, while we were at the Crystal Palace, their country had become far more prosperous than it had ever been before. This was largely due to the enterprise of the Moravian Mission which had introduced new crops, and had taught the Lahoulis how to irrigate their fields by bringing conduits from the glaciers to feed the barren slopes of waterless mountains in order that fields and meadows could be flooded, and the villagers assured of a constant supply of water.

Often while we were in Kyelang the valley echoed to the detonation of blasting going on somewhere far away among the mountains where a new conduit was being built below the snout of a glacier.

The work of flowing water into channels to feed the fields was usually entrusted to the children of the villages. It was glorious fun for them; they splashed and puddled with mud and water, damming the streams till a small lake formed. Then the dam would burst, sending the water swirling over the roads, pouring through stone walls, tumbling the walls into its torrent, and carrying away tons of precious soil which a thriftier people would have treasured and planted up; to say nothing of time wasted on rebuilding the walls.

When we first heard the rumbling flood of Kyelang's collapsing

walls we looked up to the glaciers, hoping to see another avalanche like the one seen in the Chandra Valley. It was a different kind of avalanche that we saw, and we soon came to recognize the noise of a flood of boulders, mud and water cascading over fields, pouring on to the road, or charging through some noisome alley into the main street of the village. The joyous shouts of children assured us that the noise meant just another breach in somebody's boundary wall.

This sort of thing was typical of the improvidence of Lahoulis. There is a serious scarcity of wood, water and arable land in their country, yet they daily allow tons of soil to be swept away by artificial landslides due to careless methods of irrigation. They take little or no trouble either to plant or to preserve the juniper trees which grow well in that dry climate, and which form their chief source of fuel. And they leave, unwatered, tracts of desiccated soil which could be irrigated to form good fields for crops.

Shortly before the war Lahoul had discovered an easy means of making money, and about ten years ago the country was becoming ruined by a prosperity brought from Kashmir in the shape of a few seeds of the herb called 'Khut'.

When the root of this herb (*Saussurea lappa*) is burned it produces a valuable Chinese incense, and for many years past it had been cultivated in its natural home in Kashmir, where it was grown specially for the Chinese market. From the few small seeds that were brought to Lahoul there sprang up acres and acres of healthy crops of Khut. Almost every village in the land began planting seeds gathered from the first crop of tough looking herbs which flourished in Lahoul as easily as in Kashmir.

Every available field was planted with the stuff, only an odd corner here and there being spared for the growing of food crops. Within a year or so the country was becoming over planted. But the madness for money blinded the people to the threat of a slump which seemed bound to come, one which, combined with the spoiling of their fields for food crops, would probably reduce the country to poverty and famine.

We tried the effect of burning a root of Khut to test the claim that its incense had the 'fragrance of violets'. Possibly we ought to have dried the root more thoroughly, for we knew of no violets that smelt like those acrid fumes. Far more noticeable was the harsh, pungent smell of the newly gathered crops, a smell which always lingered for some time after a caravan of mules and ponies had passed, the animals heavily laden with bundles of Khut being carried down the valleys.

Meanwhile the work of farming food crops was left almost entirely to women and children. I doubt if Lahouli men were keen workers at any time. They don't mind slouching along the roads and driving their mule-trains lazily through the valleys; but they preferred to lounge about the village idling and gossiping and quarrelling. Their tempers were normally surly, and frequently inflamed by potations of *Lugri*—a fearsome, fiery drink distilled from barley.

The introduction of Khut, which could be left more or less to look after itself until harvest time, was the dawn of a golden age for the men. They were amassing more money than they had ever seen in their lives, spending it lavishly on 'foreign' goods from Kulu—tinned peaches and salmon, patent foods, soap (we never knew why), and a fabulous amount of rubbish and finery. We met one man who, unable to read a word in any language, had bought a whole library which Mr. Peter had left to be auctioned. Many of the books were really valuable; I think he paid ten rupees (about fifteen shillings) for the lot.

The women of Lahoul were far pleasanter and more reliable than the men. For the women life meant work—ceaseless, grinding work, as harsh and thankless as the hard and stony mountains where they toiled. Yet they worked as though they were happy, singing while they slaved in the fields, laughing uproariously when they rested and refreshed themselves by hunting lice in each others' hair. They never had far to hunt. Sometimes we watched them fingering their way through hair so matted with neglect that it looked like twists of black tobacco. Searching fingers went fiddling amongst dusty, ropy tresses, then paused—and popped; and the ladies would turn and laugh with us, proudly holding their catches up for display.

When not hunting lice, or wielding spade or hoe, their hands were busy knitting, always using an inordinate number of needles. They knitted as they climbed the mountain paths, making their way to the fields, fifty-pound loads on their backs, often much more than that, and a baby slung on top of the load—its head nodding and lolling as if at any moment it would fall off and roll away like a dislodged stone.

Lahoul lies very near the borders of Tibet and the country is completely under the influence of its Buddhist monasteries.

Built into the very fabric of the mountains, the monasteries dominate the valleys. Massed tiers of masonry grafted on to the hillside, the monastery buildings range from cliff to crag as though graven out of the rocks from which they rise. Ground out of the



rocks, too, seemed the harsh braying of the trumpets blown by lamas announcing the hours of prayer. That discord sounding above the howl and moan of the river, plunging through its hidden gorge, typified the grinding severity of a country whose every aspect was hostile to the existence of man.

In Lahoul, as in Tibet, most families are required to dedicate at least one son to the monastic life, and young lamas start their training at a very early age. We saw children who looked little more than six or seven years old wearing the long red robes of priesthood, their duties being mainly to attend the older lamas. They learn to read their scriptures, written in Tibetan characters, but to most of them the words are sounds whose meaning is unknown to them. Like the old lama whom we had watched in Rupa, they grow up able to read without understanding, acquiring merit as long as they can spell out the words they utter in a low, monotonous chant.

The lamas of Kyelang were eager to show us their monasteries, justly proud of their murals which had been recently painted by a young lama who was certainly a gifted artist. The paintings—depicting scenes illustrating legends of their faith—were executed with an astounding wealth of colour and detail, the colours so gay and vivid that the walls seemed to blaze with the glinting light of flowers startlingly bright against the sombre browns and reds that prevailed in dimly lighted rooms.

Seeing that such a large proportion of the male population enters the monasteries makes it the more puzzling to understand why Tibet and her neighbouring countries indulge in the practice of 'fraternal polyandry'—the system which allows one woman to become the wife of a family of brothers. Where the number of eligible husbands must be small in proportion to the number of women one would have expected polygamy to be more popular, but in Lahoul and Ladakh polyandry is the accepted way of marriage.

Various explanations are given as to the origin of the system, which has existed in Tibet (where both monogamy and polygamy are also recognized) from a very distant past. One argument favours the idea that polyandry may have offered a means of limiting the size of families in remote regions that could support only a very small population, regions so inaccessible, even for Tibet, that emigration would be difficult if not impossible. Another argument urges the convenience of the system as a means of keeping family property together.

Whatever the reasons given by Lahoulis, it seems likely that

the custom was brought with them from Tibet in the days when they first migrated to their present country.

That they have migrated from Tibet appears certain. Language, dress, customs, occupation; dwellings, dirt and smells, all follow closely to the tradition of Tibet. Their religion, too, with its blind reliance on the power of the monasteries, the magic of *chortens*, *mendungs*, prayer-flags, and praying-wheels, is purest lamaism, as practised in Tibet.

One peculiarity of Lahoul (which I don't think belongs to Tibet) is the prevalence of straw shoes scattered about the landscape. Years ago I used to puzzle about that verse in the psalms where it says: "Over Edom will I cast out my shoe." Was it customary in Edom to throw shoes about in the manner of Lahoul? We had seen the women making those straw shoes and we had noticed that a fair amount of time and trouble went to the making of them. Yet everywhere throughout the valleys we saw good straw shoes abandoned by the roadside, lying in the fields and in the village streets, and far along the dusty highway after we left Kyelang, making for the desolate regions nearer to the borders of Ladakh.

## *Desolation*

NOT far beyond Kyelang the bridle track entered the only forest on that side of the Rohtang Pass, a forest of juniper trees clothing the slopes of the hills. The dry, twisted trunks of the junipers, their dead green foliage, and the dusty, stony steepes of the hills gave an impression of some forlorn, forgotten world. It was still and lifeless, the eerie silence under the trees broken only by the tuneless note of the Himalayan chough and the murmur of the Bhaga River churning its way unseen, deep in its cleft among rocks and boulders below the forest.

Up and down the valleys at that season of the year flocks are herded, most of them tended by nomad herdsmen. We had met them first at Khoksar, thousands and thousands of sheep and goats filling the lonely valleys with the sound of bleating. Now, on our three-day journey to the Bara Lacha Pass, we began meeting them again. Once more we found ourselves forced off the narrow bridle track, having to scramble up the hillside, often clinging to rocks while sheep went by in such numbers that if we had chosen to count them (which we could not have done because of the dust) we might have induced sleep for a hundred years.

Always the herdsmen were accompanied by their dogs, fierce Tibetan mastiffs, or cross-bred dogs that were trained to guard their owners in their yak-hair tents, and to help herd the sheep along the mountain paths. Often the sheep were saddled with panniers packed with salt to be traded in lower villages, or even to be sent through to India.

Somehow or other we seldom met yaks as beasts of burden in Lahoul, though we had often seen these enchanting animals working in the fields round Kyelang.

The first stage of our journey ended that evening at Jispa, a nice little village set among fields and trees in a hollow where the hills swept back, leaving the river space to spread itself—no longer raving in its narrow cleft but flowing freely in winding, spacious curves.

We judged that somewhere up here might have been the head of the glacier that once had filled the valley. Next day, about four miles farther up we found ourselves crossing a bowl-shaped hollow in the mountains, the sort of hollow that is typical of the work of ice; undoubtedly the head of an ancient glacier.

Above this lovely oasis in the mountains tremendous peaks soared into the sky above valleys whose streams went winding through flowery meadows under the dappled shade of willow trees and poplars. Five or six valleys had their beginning or end in this place, valleys which in their day had been filled with ice. Those which came down from the higher mountains were still gripped by glaciers whose snouts were only a few hundred feet above us.

The trees and meadows of that oasis proved to be the last traces of fertility on a journey that led us to regions of fantastic desolation. When we last saw the Bhaga River it was again crushed into a narrow gorge spanned by a rope bridge, the ropes being made of birch twigs. It looked much worse than the cane bridges of the Assam hills; I was glad we did not have to cross.

Our next halt was to be at Patseo, which we presumed to be a village, twelve thousand feet above the level of the plains. We knew we should get there in time for the great annual fair for which Patseo is famous. We were looking forward to this, expecting to see all manner of interesting people and to learn something more of the customs of the country; but we hoped that the rest-house would be decently remote from the noise of the village and the fair. We had had enough already of the howling noises, and the unchecked barking of the dogs of Kyelang.

The road to Patseo dawdled and dipped and climbed amongst rocks and stones in a landscape that became more and more desolate with every mile. The soil up there was reddish in colour, and the rocky valley twisted along between almost vertical walls of barren, shaly hills. Nobody could have claimed for the place 'an awful lot of scenery', though they might have complained of there being an awful lot of stones.

The red-brown monotony of the hills was unrelieved by the gleam of glaciers or snow peaks; we were too close under the hills to see the higher peaks above.

Like clumsy, crawling beetles we moved across a mirage-forming landscape where the sun blazed from a sky that seemed too near; a sun that made the heat dance above rocks and boulders, and where the sudden chattering of a stream made weird music in that world of rock and stone.

Without the guidance of our Lahouli porters we might have missed Patseo altogether. Even when we understood that we had arrived we could not believe it.

There was no village and, at first sight, no rest-house—a fact which did not worry us as we had with us a tent, knowing that beyond Patseo there were no rest-houses.

When at last we spotted it, the rest-house looked small and lonely, a tiny stone hut crouching among rocks that lay sprawled and tumbled on the skirts of shaly steeps pouring down from a range of snow-capped mountains. Up here, in every forsaken valley and all round us, lay complete and utter desolation. Rocks, crags, mountain and cliff, everything before our eyes seemed to be disintegrating, pouring into the desolation their share of further broken rock and shale.

We looked for signs of the great Patseo fair. Where among this wilderness would people have a fair? No need for us to worry lest the noise of the village and the fair might disturb us in the rest-house. Patseo fair consisted of a few tents pitched among the stones on the banks of the Darcha River—and here the wool of Ladakhi flocks is exchanged for grain from Lahoul. Three valleys met here, so presumably the place was convenient as a market for the people whose homes lay far away among the vastness of this mountain region.

Patseo and its annual fair had come nowhere near our imagined picture of the place. But Zingzingbar, where we camped next day, managed to out-do Patseo. Why Zingzingbar had a name at all was something we could not find out.

Presumably the name means something. The sound of it anyway did something to describe that awful ravine filled with smashed rock and splintered shale.

When we reached it at midday the sun's heat was almost unbearable. At that height, fourteen thousand feet, we seemed so frightfully close to the sun. It blazed on everything with brassy fury, and it struck back from the rocks till the dust of the track burned through your shoes.

Morna and Jasper were again suffering from blistered pads. We cursed ourselves for having brought the dogs to such a place. But we could not have left them alone and unattended in Kyelang.

And even in Kyelang Jasper had been ill, suffering from the height that had caused his nose to bleed. There had been one awful night when the black spaniel's nose had bled alarmingly. Blood had streamed from his nostrils, splashing on to the floor, almost choking him. The only thing that had eased the trouble was to walk him up and down the road. Off and on the whole night through my husband and Jasper had walked up and down the village streets between the sleeping houses of Kyelang. The following morning we discovered in the local dispensary some kind of remedy, I forget what, which gradually stopped the bleeding.

At Zingzingbar both dogs were fit, apart from sore feet, and happy as long as they could remain with us.

Looking at Zingzingbar it seemed as though everything had happened with such violence that no large, sheltering rocks had survived. Everything had been ground down by ice, weather and avalanche, smashed into fragments, hurled down and pulverized until the narrow floor of the ravine was covered by tumbled boulders, smashed rock and sharp, splintered stones, and gritty, gravelly sand. The prevailing colour was a brownish red, like old bloodstains, with a sharp white light struck off its edges by the blinding glare of the sun.

We had intended spending two days at Zingzingbar but the fierce heat of the sun from which there was no escape (the daytime heat in the tent was suffocating) decided us to go on and up to the Bara Lacha Pass that afternoon.

As the dogs had gone to sleep in the tent, oblivious of the stuffiness, we left them there, while Kirit Ram, my husband and myself covered the four-mile journey to the pass.

Although it lay sixteen thousand feet high there was nothing spectacular about the Bara Lacha Pass, no revelation of new worlds such as we had seen from the Rohtang Pass. Nothing but a lake lying glassily still, inexpressibly lonely, reflecting the shapes of the dreary, stony hills that rose above it.

The Bara Lacha and the remote valley beyond it form part of one of the highest and loneliest highways in the world. Those who use it most spend their lives journeying to and from incredibly far-off places in Tibet and Central Asia. Language difficulties form no barrier to friendship here; you greet each other in whatever language is natural to you. For a brief moment on your journey you make new friends—then part to go your different ways, men and animals dwindling to tiny specks moving across the immensity of the mountains.

I did not take my pony up to the pass. By that time both my

husband and I were acclimatized to living at ten thousand feet in Kyelang; almost daily we had climbed to thirteen or fourteen thousand feet among the high, sloping meadows. Our experience was that every two thousand feet you climbed necessitated further acclimatization before you could move higher—with comfort. We never remained at fourteen thousand feet long enough to feel at ease at that height. Yet the dry air of Zingzingbar was exhilarating. Only the blazing sun was intolerable.

In a mood of defiance I had decided to walk the whole way from Zingzingbar to the pass. It took us about five hours to cover those four miles of gentle climbing, and every breath came in a laboured gasp, but I am glad we were able to do it. The pass marked the limit of our plans for that journey, but not the limit of a botanist's determination. My husband planned to come back again and to go farther before we left Lahoul.

I had hoped to go with him but our return journey to Kyelang proved that perhaps I had already tried my strength too far. Even though I rode the whole way back I was miserably tired and shaken all the time. The dogs were finding the stony tracks difficult, too.

So when, after another fortnight in Kyelang, my husband returned and travelled beyond the Bara Lacha, the dogs and I stayed behind at the Crystal Palace, with Sennacherib to look after us.

It was queer living alone at the Crystal Palace with nothing but mountains and monasteries and Lahoulis all round us. There were daily walks, to tell the time, daily walks with sketch-book and pencil, and other walks just to see how high I could go. And whether I might chance upon some flower or grass of great botanical value. I never did. Such specimens as I collected had already been found before, and in any event were usually the commonest of herbs.

Then back again to the Crystal Palace, where I helped Sennacherib with the cooking. His cookhouse was a kind of stone-built cave made impenetrable by the acrid fumes of juniper wood. But in the living-room at the house I had my single-burner oil stove (there were no fireplaces) on which I cooked the dogs' dinners, and made puddings, scones and bread for ourselves.

Sennacherib's knowledge of cooking was limited, but he took the keenest interest in my performance and was always anxious to learn. He considered that every man, woman and child in Lahoul belonged to the lowest ranks of the criminal classes, and at night he took the utmost care to bolt the trap door and to make

sure that the dogs and I were safely guarded from marauders.

He offered to sleep on the veranda floor so as to be able to deal immediately with thieves and murderers. I managed to assure him that I had no fears, though at the time I was reading a book called *Man Alone*—so fearfully creepy that it kept me wakeful for the best part of two nights.

Then I poisoned myself with a tin of kipper snacks.

We'd often had them before, and the fish that night had tasted as good as ever. But about two hours after I had gone to bed I began to feel extremely ill. By the sharp, stabbing pain inside me I guessed that I was poisoned. I pressed my hot-water bottle against the pain but it did not help much. I began to feel terribly sick, and the pain was unbearable. I got up and staggered, moaning, to the room I used as a bathroom. I was exceedingly sick.

And then, lying on the floor, too weak to get up, I realized that I must dispose of my shame—since I could not bear it to be discovered next morning by the Lahouli youth who attended to the bathrooms.

Still moaning with pain and frightfully weak, I pulled myself up and carried the basin out by a back door. This involved unbolting the door, which was upstairs and which opened on to a plank bridge that spanned a deep gully between the back of the house and the mountain side.

Giddy and faint and stabbed with pain, I crossed that cursed bridge and then climbed up the mountain seeking a stream where I could clean the basin. I found the stream and lay down beside it, shuddering with cold and weakness. I felt almost too miserable to get up again. I felt I might as well die there as anywhere else.

But the pain was a little better. I began to think of the comfort of a hot-water bottle, and of the warm bodies of Morna and Jasper leaning against me. So I dragged myself up and went shivering back along that foul little bridge across the chasm behind the house.

By that time the hot-water bottle was cold. At all costs I was determined to reheat it. I thanked Heaven and my own forethought for the oil stove.

Still moaning and shivering, half crying with self-pity, I moved about the house, lighting the stove and filling a kettle with ice-cold water which I knew would take ages to boil. While waiting I wrapped myself in a blanket and lay down on the dirty wooden floor in front of the stove.

It did not give out much heat but the very sight of the small blue flame brought comfort to my shivering self.



Yet of all the trials of that hideous night I remember more vividly than anything that seemingly endless wait for the kettle to boil. I can still feel the hardness of the bare boards on which I lay, and I can shiver now (as I did then, uncontrollably) as I recall my craving for warmth—real glowing warmth to fill the scoured-out hollow of pain that ached at the centre of gravity.

Above all, I can feel again the comfort of the hot bottle when at last I got it filled and, clasping it close against me, staggered back to bed.

When Sennacherib called me next morning with the usual pot of tea I told him of the night's trouble.

He was horrified. Why had I not awakened him? I might have died. I must stay in bed and he would make me soup. He would bring me tea and hot milk. Kyelang was indeed an evil place to make me suffer like that. And no doctor to make me well again. Sennacherib's square black beard shook with disapproval till it nearly came off.

But I was all right. A bit weak for the rest of that day, but strong enough the following day to walk out with the dogs to meet their master on his way back from beyond the Bara Lacha Pass.

He was triumphant about his journey. It had taken him to the borders of Ladakh, to the edge of the Tibetan plateau; that same plateau which, for a thousand miles or more, stretches on and on, infinitely bleak and lonely, strangely beautiful, wearily monotonous. The plateau that lies behind the Himalayas stretching from somewhere near the Kashmir mountains in the west far away to the Chinese borders beyond the mountains of Assam.

He told me that from the Bara Lacha onwards there had been little variation in the monotony of the scenery. It had been extremely cold; he had had to wear the tea-cosy to protect his ears from frostbite.

He was ecstatic about the flora of the district. Having myself seen the sort of country where he had been I was astonished to hear of anything growing among those desolate wastes. But if there were only one grass growing in the desert of Sahara a botanist would find it and go home crooning over his discovery.

Within ten minutes of his return to the Crystal Palace the living-room table was covered with botanical 'treasures'. Mostly they looked to me like moth-eaten pin-cushions, or mangy bits of fur. All the same I kept wishing I could have gone with him to the bleak country beyond the Bara Lacha Pass.

We felt we had achieved a good deal—more than we had ever

hoped. But we recognized that we were no pioneers of exploration; others besides ourselves had come this way. While we had been living in Kyelang people had passed through from time to time, people from the cities of India, moving onwards far beyond the limits of our journey. Yet at that moment we were content. We would have given much to have been able to go farther; we envied those whose youth and strength enabled them to cover greater distances in less time and with less comfort than we found necessary. But sometimes it seemed that in their hurry to get there, or to complete a round trip, they tended to miss much of those things which, to us, mattered more than just being able to say that we 'had done it'.

We had reached the level of the Tibetan plateau; that, at the time, seemed as far as we would ever go. The war had given us our chance to come, the war seemed likely to put a stop to all further journeys. For more than a week we had had no news and we had no idea of how things were going. We knew only that we had to go back—back again over the Rohtang Pass, and back to Dehra Dun.

Some days later we recrossed the Rohtang Pass. We did so in a blinding mist that turned to steady, drenching rain. A curtain was drawn across the mountains we had left behind; the way before us was darkened by the monsoon clouds driving against the hills, while the valleys sobbed with the voice of ceaseless rain.

Though we did not know it then, our journey back from Lahoul was in some ways symbolic of the next few years during which we were to be caught up in the machinery of war.

From the mists of the Rohtang Pass we moved down into the gloom of rain-soaked forests loud with the wailing of the weather and the menacing voice of the Beas in full flood. That darkening journey was typical of the way the world was at that time groping through the murk of the worst years of the war; we were no longer able to see the peaks beyond the pass, but knew they were still there, remote as the vision of peace which in those days seemed all too far away.

Some months later we were moved, at a week's notice, back to Assam.



The Thakur's Castle, Gondla



View from Kyelang

*Drawing by the Author*

## *Back to Assam*

WE had no idea why we had been recalled to Assam, no notion of the part of the province to which we would be sent. We knew only that we were to 'report' in Shillong where, presumably, my husband's new duties would be divulged. He was not anxious to go back to forest work. He guessed rightly that every aspect of the old forest life must be horribly changed now that Assam was in the front line of battle.

It was April 1942, and we had hardly crossed the boundary between Bengal and Assam before we saw how everything had been mutilated by the impact of war on the frontiers of Assam. Forests were being cut down to make room for enormous military camps. Hills were being slashed out for the construction of roads. Everybody was frantically busy. Nobody knew what was happening. Everything was disorganized. A beaten army was straggling out from Burma. Refugees—thousands of them—exhausted, ill and dying, were pouring over the hills from Burma into Assam.

After the comparative somnolence of Dehra Dun we found ourselves bewildered by conditions in Assam. We were there for nearly a week before we knew where our headquarters, if any, were to be. Or what work my husband would have to do. It was obvious that there were going to be jobs for both of us but (as news commentators reported in those days) the 'situation was confused'. All we could gather was that my husband would be sent to some district where his knowledge of the local language would be needed. The Naga Hills, perhaps. Or the Balipara Frontier Tract. We prayed and hoped that we would not be stuck down in Shillong.

I remember the two of us on our first evening in Shillong

walking to the shops, staring about us like visitors from another century, feeling ourselves to be completely alien, knowing ourselves to be needed yet so far unwanted in the bustling muddle of activity.

And then my husband stopped. He was looking at a figure standing on the other side of the road.

"Surely—?" he said. "Yes . . . it *is*!"

It was Khatm Mia. Suddenly we knew we were welcome back. And we knew that we needed Khatm Mia. We had not brought Sennacherib away from Dehra Dun. Assam was too far from the old man's home and family. Bitter as it was to part from him, we had had to leave him behind.

But here was Khatm Mia, apparently rather down on his luck. There and then in the main street of Shillong we took him on again, and from that moment the chaos of our return began to shape itself into some kind of order.

Two days later the old cook appeared outside our rooms in the hotel. Neat and spotless as ever, the pill-box hat on his head, his beard only a little greyer than when we had last seen him—five years before.

Impossible to take back Khatm Mia and to refuse to give the old cook a job. Although we did not know what the future held for us we would certainly need a cook. It was good to feel that we had already collected together something of the old family party. We had the old cook, we had Khatm Mia, we still had two dogs, Morna and Jasper.

And then our family party was split in two. My husband was sent up to the Naga Hills where, at that time of chaos, I was not allowed to go.

Finally and for always my husband had ceased to be a forest officer, or to have any further connection with the work of the forest department. His work in the Naga Hills was partly administrative, partly one of those 'top-secret' jobs—about which most people (except myself) knew all there was to be known.

At the end of four months he came back to Shillong and took over the administration of the Burma Refugee Organization, work which entailed incessant travelling between Shillong and the refugee camps right up to the Assam-Burma frontier.

During most of the next three years I lived alone, with the old cook looking after me, in two abominable rooms shut off from one end of my husband's office in Shillong. He was away nearly all the time, able to make only brief and unexpected visits to attend to office business.

To describe his work or my own varied war jobs in Shillong

would take me a long way from the theme of my story of forest road and mountain track. There was a vast amount of incident and interest in it all, particularly when and after the Japs invaded the Naga Hills. After the invasion my husband was engaged on the business of rehabilitation of the hills, in addition to the work of looking after refugees.

When I look back to those days oppression weighs down upon me. I recall the oppression that was heavy on the world; it seemed suddenly to have compressed itself into those two abominable rooms where for so long I lived alone. Without even any dogs.

Within six months of each other both Morna and Jasper died, before we had been back in Assam for as much as one year. They were the last dogs we ever had in India.

Just occasionally during those war years I was able to accompany my husband on some of his journeys. From time to time on those journeys (grotesquely different from those of former days) in his army truck we saw the Se-La Range far across the Assam Valley. That was as near as we ever got to *that* part of the hills again. I remember that when the tide of war began to turn in our favour in 1943 the range was clearly visible from Shillong. Day after day it hung like a mirage above the distant blue of the foothills—Kandu, Chumo and Nyegi Kangsong raised high above the serrated line of snows stretching east and west. Westwards as far as Kanchenjunga, faintly discernible, and Chumolhari, no more than a tiny finger pointing up above the Bhutan hills, above the forests where we had toured so many years ago.

If anyone had told us then that a day would come when we would rest upon the slopes of Chumolhari we would not have believed him. Even the vision of peace seemed less remote than such an improbability. Apart from the Se-La Range, Chumolhari was the one mountain in all the Himalayas that I was most anxious to see at close range. We had read about it and seen photographs that showed the mountain as a little cardboard triangle set up on the edge of the plain.

No photograph gave the least idea of the height, nor of the ethereal loveliness of this goddess of Tibet. And from what we had read of it we judged that it must be infinitely more wonderful than the cardboard triangle of the photographs. Therefore we wanted to see for ourselves that isolated cone sheering up ten thousand feet above the dreariness of a plateau fourteen thousand feet high.

We had had no hope of ever travelling again among the Himalayas. Nevertheless, the idea came to us as we realized that leave of some sort was essential for both of us. We had had no

home leave for more than nine years, and even if the war were to end next day there was little chance of getting home.

If we were allowed to take leave it would have to be somewhere in or on the borders of India, as when we had gone to Lahoul.

We applied for leave and it was granted. With permission to travel to Tibet via Sikkim.

It was the sort of news that would have set me palpitating with excitement in the days when we had looked yearningly at the Se-La Pass from the top of the Piri-La. We had always wanted to go to Tibet; now the chance had come. Yet the prospect filled me with little more enthusiasm than the prospect of a visit to Calcutta. Perhaps I hardly realized that it was true. Or that if it were true we would ever get there. And even if we got there we might be disappointed.

In a mood of dullest lethargy I packed the stores needed for our journey. We were not taking Khatm Mia with us this time. Nor the cook. We had been advised to hire a Lepcha servant in Gangtok, a man who was used to the conditions of the country. So we took with us only a Nepalese 'handyman'—a man named Sachi Ram, who would look after the army truck.

In the fifteen-hundredweight truck we travelled through the night across Assam, through the day across Bengal, and upwards through the Teesta Valley towards Gangtok in Sikkim. Ridiculously, as we travelled through the night we felt ourselves to be sort of Marco Polos setting out for the land to which they had always longed to go; ridiculously, because after all those years we really ought to have learned that there were no new worlds left for us to explore. Yet it was not until we got as far as Gangtok that we knew that our 'Marco Polo adventure' was to amount to little more than a Cook's Tour. Our chance had come too late; almost too late. But we could not have guessed that that year Tibet (within limits) was being invaded by more tourists than we had ever dreamed of in Chakrata or Lahoul.

Actually, our Cook's Tour to Tibet could not be said to have started until we left the plains behind and crossed the Teesta River by the Coronation Bridge.

Swinging the clumsy truck round a sharp bend in the road, we saw the bridge below us, slung across the deep gorge of the river.

For proportion, grace and harmony of design, I have never seen so lovely a bridge. Until you are just about to turn on to it, it looks too fairy-like and gossamer to bear the weight of anything much heavier than a butterfly. It is incredible that anything constructed of reinforced concrete can look as delicate as a cobweb



spun between the rocks that rise high above the river.

Only when we were actually on the bridge were we able to appreciate its enormous size and strength. Our fifteen-hundred-weight truck moved like a fly crawling along the wide runway between immense girders of white concrete.

Some miles farther on, following the narrow road that winds among the woods above the river, we found ourselves faced by another bridge, one that would have been comic if we had not been halted by the apparent impossibility of getting the truck to fit between a pair of medieval bastions that guarded each end of an almost prehistoric wooden bridge.

While the truck was being manœuvred backwards and forwards in a seemingly hopeless effort to insert it between the massive stone bastions I had time to read a large notice warning people that the bridge was unsafe for heavy traffic. A list followed, enumerating suitable types of vehicles, etc. It seemed to work out at:

1. Bullock-carts (unloaded and unyoked), one at a time.
2. Mules and ponies (which must be unloaded first), one at a time.
3. Wheelbarrows and perambulators, to be unloaded first.
4. Pedestrians—single file only.

“And that,” I thought, “is the end. From here we go back.”

Whether disappointment was greater than relief (at the knowledge that we were spared the ordeal of crossing the bridge) I don't know, for at that moment the truck lurched forward and, to my horror, began to move slowly between the bastions, scraping them on both sides as it bumped on to the wooden boards of the bridge.

I turned to ask my husband if he had read the notice, but seeing his look of grim determination I shut my eyes and silently prayed that the end might come quickly.

This, I thought, was far worse than the cane bridge at Rupa, or the birch-twig bridge across the Bhaga. Those fragile affairs at any rate had not been plastered with scarlet lettered warnings foretelling certain doom if you happened to be just a bit on the heavy side.

Somewhere near the middle of the bridge the wooden boards creaked and knocked so violently under the stress of the heavily laden truck that I prepared myself for the worst.

Far below us there foamed a raging tributary of the Teesta, and I was convinced that the end of this, our last journey to the hills, lay somewhere in that stream. A shattered army truck, two dead bodies, and only the bastions left to show where the bridge had been.

But the bridge did not give way. We were told afterwards that although it had been built long before the days of motor traffic,

heavier vehicles than ours crossed it every day. Nevertheless, on our return journey I chose to cross that bridge on my own feet. Sachi Ram took the truck across, and I was appalled when I saw the way the bridge sagged—until it became almost V-shaped—as the heavy vehicle crawled across the creaking centre boards.

For much of its way the road to Gangtok kept down in the valley, following the windings of the Teesta Gorge, and down there it was hot—hot and humid as a steam laundry.

I remember we both became extremely thirsty, still more extremely grateful to Sachi Ram who fed us on slices of pineapple gouged out with his pocket-knife from two or three large, prickly fruits purchased in some bazaar the previous day. Every now and again from the back of the truck Sachi Ram's hand, caked with car-oil and dust, would be thrust through towards us, a hand that offered grimy slices and chunks of pineapple neatly arranged on a banana leaf. It was Heavenly refreshment.

As long as it stayed in the valley the road, though very narrow, was good enough. But when it began to climb across the face of the hills it was the sort of road that forced me to keep my eyes shut tight. The road was far worse than the hill road to Manali. Even in dry weather, a rare condition in those hills, the Gangtok road is hair-raising, but when the monsoon hurls itself against the mountains, with clouds breaking in cataracts that fall upon the forests, then the hills disintegrate. They are torn by landslides that carry away the face of mountains; that leave gaps where yards of road have fallen down to the river several hundred feet below—the mountains again pouring down their substance to the making of the valleys.

We had to cope with an awful landslide on our return journey from Tibet. Luckily, our truck had already been sent down the road to wait for us beyond a notorious mile where landslides occur regularly.

It was not actually raining that day when we reached the 'slip'. If it had been I know I could not have faced it. I would have climbed any distance to make a detour over the top of the hills to avoid the horror of crossing that awful gash. It was bad enough in dry weather; with rain pouring down, turning loose rubble into shifting, sliding mud—the very thought of it made one's finger-tips tingle with horror.

Only the day before we crossed it two women had had to be guided over blindfolded, their eyes bandaged so that their nerve might not give way. A sort of path, a few inches wide, had been scratched across the face of the slip—a mess of gravelly rubble that

kept sliding down from above, down to the path, and down again to the river—an almost vertical drop to where the Teesta, foaming-flooded, went scouring out the hills hundreds of feet below.

On our upward journey we had no trouble of that sort. Nosing its way upwards out of the steamy warmth of the forests, the road curved along the face of bare hillsides, crossing into Sikkim and ending in Gangtok, that lovely little capital that straddles a ridge, eight thousand feet high, facing the whole of the Kanchenjunga range.

The Kanchenjunga range has been described so often that it is enough here to say that we found it beyond description.

In Hooker's *Himalayan Journals* can be found one of the most fascinating accounts of Kanchenjunga and of Sikkim. In those days neither Everest nor K2 had been discovered, and Kanchenjunga was reckoned the highest mountain in the world. But Hooker repeatedly refers to a 'lofty peak' on the borders of Nepal, a peak which he suspected of being even higher than Kanchenjunga—the same mountain which was named 'Everest' not long after the *Himalayan Journals* were first published in 1854.

Free of mist and cloud, the whole range of giant peaks was standing up, incredibly near to us across the valleys in the early morning after our arrival in Gangtok. We hurried out to get a better view from the hill behind the Residency—first dabbing our shoes and ankles with a specially recommended anti-leech preparation. It was a solution of areca-nut, said to be better than our tobacco-leaf tea. We ought to have known better.

It took us just half an hour to climb that hill, admire Kanchenjunga, and get back in time for breakfast. During that half-hour leeches by the thousand had fastened upon us. Although we kept tugging them off as fast as we could locate them, they defeated us. By the time we got back to the house I had eleven bites on one foot, eight on another, and my husband had more than he could count. They itched the whole way from Gangtok to Tibet.

For leeches Sikkim must be one of the worst countries in the world. Or the best, if you look at it from the point of view of the leech. We had not thought that they could possibly be worse than they were in Assam. But there was not a doubt about it. They dropped on us from trees, fastened on us as we brushed past bushes, assailed us from the ground and from ferny banks—assaulted us from everywhere. We were not even safe in the Residency garden where guinea-fowls strutted about battenning on them.

But our old brew of tobacco tea saved us after that first taste of the virulence of the Sikkim leeches.

One thing we had much looked forward to in Gangtok was the arrival of our old friend Kirit Ram, who was coming from Dehra Dun to help in the collection of botanical specimens.

We were out in the Residency garden when Kirit Ram arrived, and before we had time to utter cries of welcome he was at our feet—literally! He simply prostrated himself and embraced my husband's boots until the man inside them nearly overbalanced. Kirit Ram was weeping with joy.

It happened that the day of Kirit Ram's arrival was my husband's birthday. We had not advertised the fact among the house party being entertained by Sir Basil Gould, then Political agent at Gangtok. But when I came out of our room that morning I found two of the guests—Major and Mrs. Sherriff—waltzing down the stairs. They had recently arrived from Lhasa, where for several years Major Sherriff had been British agent.

Knowing that they had loved their life in Lhasa, and were keenly interested in everything to do with Tibet, I was rather surprised at this display of joy. Knowing how *we* would have felt the wrench of leaving such a life as theirs had been, I paused—amazed. Then Mrs. Sherriff looked up and laughed.

"It's my husband's birthday," she explained.

I told her it was also *my* husband's birthday. Within minutes everybody in the Residency knew that a double event had occurred.

As if that was not enough we heard that day of the fall of Rangoon.

The war was almost over. A double birthday was making everyone hilarious, even at breakfast time. And Kirit Ram was back with us again.

I began to wake up to the fact that we had completed the first stage of our journey to Tibet. It was still difficult to realize this. All the more so because of the comfort and delightful hospitality at the Residency. All the same, we were longing to be started on the next stage of our journey. Longing to get started, yet somewhat apprehensive.

Only a few hours in Gantok had deflated our notion of ourselves as bold adventurers travelling to the 'forbidden country'. The place was humming with tourists, people on their way back, people still waiting to go. Never in all our travels had we met so many of 'our own people' all bent on doing the same journey, or at any rate a great deal of it the same. Our hearts sank when we visualized the inevitable congestion at the rest-houses. We felt so deflated that we almost turned back.

Thank goodness we decided to go on.

## Cook's Tour

WE did not take Sachi Ram with us beyond Gangtok as he had to be left in charge of the truck. But we hired a Lepcha lad to cook for us. His name sounded like 'Alu'—which is Hindustani for 'potato'. Therefore we always knew him as 'Potato'. We also took a young Tibetan who could speak a very few words of Hindustani. His favourite words were *Tiar hai*, meaning 'ready'. He pronounced the words like 'terry', so we called him Terry. His job was to carry the botanical presses and a tin in which specimens could be carried on the journey. Under Kirit Ram's guidance both Potato and Terry became enthusiastic collectors.

The first day's journey from Gangtok took us up through heavy forests, like those below the Piri-La, as far as Karpanang where a rest-house stood upon a narrow ledge of rock, almost the only bit of level ground in a wild gorge where the bare hills rose above the forests.

On the way we met a party of the Sikkim royal family. They were returning from Karpanang whither they had ridden to escort a friend who was returning to Lhasa. The members of the party were mounted on magnificent ponies. We heard the jingle of harness and of pony bells just as we rounded an angle of rock above an appalling precipice that dropped from the edge of the path a sheer thousand feet into the hidden depths of a ravine.

I had a pony myself to ride. But it was not the phlegmatic animal that had carried Liz and me over the passes of Lahoul.

My new pony was a poor, nervous animal that backed away and showed the whites of its eyes whenever I went near. So far I hadn't tried to ride it. I thought I would wait until the track became broader and the 'terrain' less violently precipitous. As it

was, coming so suddenly upon us one of the royal horses shied, and for one ghastly moment I thought it was going over the edge of the precipice. It was a scene that affected my dreams for some weeks to come. Those hill ponies, however, are very sure footed, and they were being ridden by expert riders.

Nevertheless, accidents happen sometimes on those terrifyingly narrow tracks. A friend of ours told us afterwards that her own pony had stumbled once on the lip of a Sikkim precipice. Her husband pulled her off just in time. But the poor animal went over the edge, plunging out of sight into a ravine fifteen hundred feet below.

Later on that day I rode my pony for a bit. I didn't at all like the way the poor thing shied and shuddered and eyed me when I was hoisted on to my saddle of rugs and cushions. But once I was up it moved along quietly enough, eventually enabling me to make a triumphal entry into Karpanang.

To reach the little rest-house on its rocky shelf we had to climb a number of rough steps from the path to the level of the house. Mounted on my pony, I was carried up over the rough, uneven steps and finally unhoisted and deposited on a narrow terrace outside the house.

Like Patseo and Zingzingbar, Karpanang seemed to be a non-existent place. The only building was the rest-house and its attendant outhouses. Otherwise the place consisted of impenetrable mist and rain. All the moisture from the plains seemed to have been driven up there, crowding together in billowing clouds. Sometimes we caught glimpses of dark crags and mountains high above the gorge. But mainly there was nothing to tempt us outside the cosiness of an extremely comfortable little house. Nothing except the sanitary arrangements. And those were hardly tempting.

All might have been well if we had been the only visitors, or if there had been no visitors there before us. The 'Place' consisted of a wooden sentry-box perched on a ledge some two minutes' climb behind the house. It was supposed to be flushed by a mountain stream that had once prattled over the stones beneath the floorboards of the sentry-box. The stream, however, had found for itself another channel. And there had been many visitors there before we came. Visitors who had not worried to cover up the traces of recent occupation. One look at the place sent me scrambling back to the rest-house for the tin of phenyl without which I never travelled anywhere.

Accustomed, as once we had been, to having the landscape

more or less to ourselves, we found on our journey to Tibet that at every halt the sanitary arrangements became a problem of first importance. It was sometimes rather acute when we had to share the accommodation with other people.

At Karpanang three travellers arrived soon after we did, three British soldiers who were, without exception, among the nicest of many nice travellers whom we encountered on our journey. We liked them so much that we immediately breached the first of three enormous cakes I had baked for our expedition.

These cakes were known as 'Front Line Cake', a speciality I used to send with my husband on his journeys to the Manipur frontier of Assam. Their goodness was due to the strainings of Rum Punch, which I used to brew in those days. These included the rinds of spiced oranges and lemons drenched in the dregs of Rum Punch.

I had not meant to breach these cakes until we were actually in Tibet. But we liked our soldier friends so much that I unpacked one of the cakes at once, and each of us had a large slice. If I had not been firm the whole cake (it weighed about three pounds) would have been consumed at Karpanang.

The soldiers moved on next day. They were on their way to Gyantse in Tibet. As we were moving slowly, stopping for at least two nights at every halt, it seemed likely that we would meet them again somewhere on their journey back to Gangtok.

The following day we, too, left Karpanang, gradually moving up towards the snow that still lay thick above ten thousand feet.

From Karpanang on its rocky ledge to the next stage—Tsomgo—the bridle path wound up and down among glens and mountains wild and lovely as the mountain glens of Scotland.

Gradually the track took us upwards till we were above the level of the last trees, and we found ourselves among bare hills that were patched with snow and covered in places with dwarf rhododendron. In the last mile we rounded a shoulder of hill and saw before us the dark lake of Tsomgo lying eerily black and still in a hollow of snow-patched mountains.

It was a lonely place, yet not completely desolate. Too like the hills of Scotland, too homely to bear comparison with the stark desolation of Lahoul.

There were people living up there on the shores of the lake, the caretaker of the rest-house and his family, besides numerous friends halting on their way to and from Sikkim and Tibet.

We woke up next morning to find snow falling steadily. It was very cold in the little wooden house on the shores of the lake.

Very cold, and it was difficult to keep a fire burning since the only fuel was rhododendron wood, which seldom burns beyond smouldering. Working hard with a pair of bellows we managed at times to induce a tiny flame to flicker, a reluctant flame which died as soon as the bellows ceased to fan its feeble life.

The snow kept falling all that day, completely covering the hills, lying thick among the rhododendron scrub along the rocky shores of the lake. It was not the sort of weather to tempt us out of doors, as long as we had the bungalow to ourselves. But here, as at Karpanang, we were obliged from time to time to take a walk in the weather, a walk about four times the distance of that at Karpanang. The sentry-box at Tsomgo involved a long journey through the snow, but the snow had purified everything and the journeys helped to acclimatize us to the height and the weather. Also, they provided chances for botanizing among the boulders, where a few hardy plants were pushing their way up through the snow.

So far, my husband's botanical zeal had not met with much reward. It was still too early for the best of the alpine flowers which we hoped to find later, hopes which were justified almost beyond belief when we returned to Tsomgo seven weeks afterwards.

In addition to the specimens collected in Tibet, throughout most of our return journey we were threading our way through alpine meadows that made the mountain slopes blaze like a garden of flowers. The tops of the high passes were a glory of primulas. And when we again saw the hills above Tsomgo lake we thought at first that they were still covered with snow. Only when we were actually climbing over them did we realize that the 'sleety-snow' was a sheet of white primulas spread all over the hills. These primulas grew as much as two feet tall and had heads of blossom as white as paper and exquisitely scented.

Watching the snow fall thicker, and still more thickly covering the hills and drifting across the lake, it was hard to realize that in a few weeks' time this mountain world would bloom like a garden in spring.

And that day, while the snow piled up round us, we heard on our portable wireless that the war was over in Europe.

Although the news had been expected for some time I suppose the actual announcement sounded strange wherever it was heard. On the shores of that lonely mountain lake it sounded queerly flat, almost banal, especially as we were alone there, unable to talk about it to anyone else.

We switched off the wireless and sat down again by the sulky



fire, trying to read our books, unable to concentrate on anything.

I remember taking a book from the shelf in the living-room. Most Government rest-houses had a bookshelf more or less filled with magazines, papers and books left by passing travellers. Although we always carried our own library with us it was amusing to look through the odd collections at the rest-houses. Often one discovered something good, especially amongst magazines dating back to the beginning of the century.

But at Tsomgo the only books were missionary works, and among them I found the most remarkably dull book I have ever tried to read. The photographs alone were enough to induce indigestion. As far as I can remember, the volume concerned the life and works of a Scottish deaconess. Its astounding dullness was like a Scottish sabbath of forty years ago. As a matter of fact we were both in a state of helpless laughter over it when we heard the sound of bustling activity. The ominous sound of visitors coming to the rest-house.

We looked out of the window and saw a young man and a young woman arriving. I realized then that I was not in the least in the mood for young visitors. Abandoning the deaconess, I seized my own book and retired to my bed, hiding myself underneath the blankets. I was prepared to stay in bed until the following day rather than share the smoky fire with any tourists. The book I was reading was far more interesting than the deaconess's but I could not keep my mind on it. Through the thin wooden walls of the house I could hear everything that went on in every other room—there were two small bedrooms besides the larger one we had been able to reserve for ourselves.

To my infinite disgust I heard my husband fraternizing with the invaders. I heard chairs being drawn up round the fire, I heard the chink of crockery and peals of merriment between snatches of conversation. Within a few minutes it seemed that a tea party was going on. I crawled to the end of my bed and tried to look through the cracks of the door. Without success.

And then, quite distinctly, I heard my husband offering the strangers—*cake!*

My Front Line Cake was being offered to tourists who probably came from Calcutta and were far better fed than we had been in Assam. Then the door opened and my husband came in with a cup of tea for me.

I glared at him and began to ask:

"Are you giving those people——?"

Lowering his voice he told me: "It's all right. They're a *grand*

couple. Scottish. You'll like them. I simply had to give them each a slice of cake. Drink your tea and then come in and meet them."

I knew that only the nicest of people, like our soldiers at Karpanang, would have induced him to breach the Front Line Cake again. So I drank my tea and lay back, blessing the luck that, so far, had ensured that our fellow travellers were of the kind we liked.

Then the door opened again and my husband's head was pushed round.

"Stay where you are," he said. "Another couple's just arriving."

I lay back flat on the bed. That made six of us, and no guarantee that more would not turn up. Six of us sharing the fire, six of us trying to avoid each other on the snowy trail to the sentry-box.

Once again the door was pushed open—not gently, as my husband had pushed it before. This time it was shoved open and I found myself gazing into the face of a vigorous-looking young woman.

She stared at me, said "Oh!" then went out, slamming the door behind her. I felt pretty sure she was not the "nice little Scottish thing" who had beguiled my husband into cutting the Front Line Cake.

I was right. My visitor was a more emphatic type, accustomed to having her own way. Of her and her husband I mainly remember that they chewed raw carrots, recommending the vegetable as being both nourishing and stimulating for mountaineers. On a diet of raw carrot they both looked as fit as horses, so we didn't offer them cake. But when I met the other couple I saw at once that they were worthy of Front Line Cake.

Both couples planned to stay two nights at Tsomgo. We (thank Heaven) moved on next morning. I say 'thank Heaven' because on the following day Tsomgo rest-house was invaded by ten more visitors, including a soldier desperately ill with malaria. Most of them had to sleep on the floor that night.

The greater part of our journey to the next halt, at Kupup, took us through snow that was three or four feet deep in places, making the going slow and tedious for our ponies and for ourselves. It was somewhere on this journey, in a place where the path dipped and wound through a wooded hollow, that I made my last attempt to ride my pony. Until then I simply hadn't dared to ride along the frightfully narrow tracks that wound and angled round the face of cliffs above ravines that didn't bear thinking about. But now that we had reached a nice homely

woodland hollow I thought it would be safe to try to ride. There was plenty of snow into which I could fall if the animal took fright. So I was hoisted into the saddle.

Almost at once my mount put on speed and carried me up to where the path ran along a rocky causeway. It was too much for me. My nerve collapsed and I refused to ride again.

I am not in the least proud of this. By refusing to ride I gave a great deal of trouble later on. But all those cliffs and chasms and the nervousness of my pony had preyed upon my mind. Every night since we had left Gangtok I had had nightmares about ponies falling over cliffs. On the brink of sleep I would jump awake, every nerve tingling with fear as I leapt back from some awful vision of catastrophe.

It may be, however, that by refusing to ride I achieved a sort of distinction—as yet unrecognized. I know that I cannot claim to be the only woman who has walked, except for two miles, all the way from Gangtok to Tibet. I doubt even if I am the only European woman to have done so. But I think I can claim to be the only European woman who has walked to Tibet in tennis shoes.

I wore tennis shoes because they were the only comfortable ones I had been able to buy in Shillong. I found them excellent, especially when it came to negotiating narrow tracks along cliff ledges.

How heavily laden pack animals were kept on such tracks at all was something I could not bear to think about. Yet hundreds of caravans must pass that way, since the Gangtok-Lhasa road is the main trade route between India and Tibet.

Kupup was to be our last halt before crossing the Jelep Pass into Tibet. We had planned to spend three nights there. It was a most delightfully lonely place, lonelier and more desolate than Tsomgo. It lay in a wide valley twelve thousand feet high among mountains that rose to sixteen and seventeen thousand feet, with the pass, the Jelep-La, at fourteen thousand feet only three miles distant.

The red roofs of the rest-house buildings gave the only touch of colour to a landscape almost entirely white with snow. Here and there upstanding rocks showed black against the snow. And the peaks above the pass showed rocky faces that broke the glare of white below a sky that was grey and heavy, heavy with the threat of snow to come.

In spite of the snow we were able to explore our surroundings. Much of our exploration was forced upon us by the usual problem

—the sanitary arrangements. At Kupup these in any recognized form did not exist. There was no sentry-box. Nothing but the wide expanse of snow-covered marsh and mountain, no trees anywhere. Nothing but distant groups of rock and boulder with clumps of dwarf rhododendron to afford cover of any kind. And to reach cover involved a considerable journey through treacherous snow.

Not once but many times during those journeys we found ourselves plunged knee-deep, or deeper, in the icy waters of streams hidden under the snow. The first journey of the day was the most exhilarating—me leaping out of bed, shoving my bare feet into tennis shoes and wrapping my fur-fabric coat closely over my pyjamas.

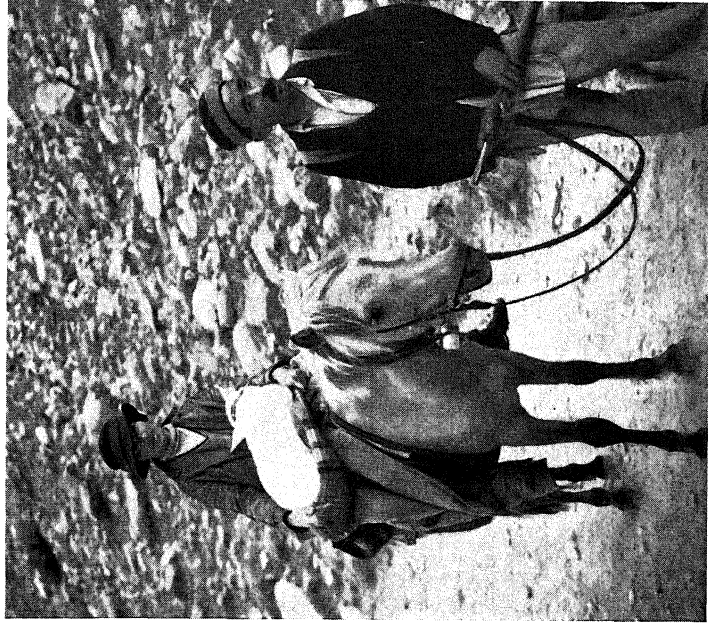
My husband went out in a mackintosh and slippers, which were apt to come off in the tug of the snow. Usually there was a blizzard raging while we set out on the first journey of the day. Pulling the collar of my coat up over my head I would go stumbling off into the white nothingness beyond the rest-house. Sometimes I was reminded of poor brave Captain Oates going out into the antarctic blizzard on the last journey of his life.

It was all highly entertaining and very good for us. I know that there at twelve thousand feet among the snow I felt fitter and more blazing with energy than I have ever felt before or since. While the botanists were prowling far afield in some distant valley I used to go out and climb as high as I dared on the slopes of the surrounding mountains. Once I got myself alarmingly involved amongst a mass of rock and rhododendron scrub. I had thought to find an easy way home but the snow was so thick that I could not be certain what was snow-covered rock and what was snow-roofed chasm. I fell into one of those chasms and hung there awhile, my hands grasping rhododendron bushes which I hoped would not break before I could find something solid on which to plant my feet. Hanging on to the branches, with my legs scrambling for a foothold, I might have been ten years old again, back in the days when my brothers and I had sought 'untrodden ways' among our Scottish hills. I was glad there was none to witness my plight as I hung suspended above that chasm of snow.

For the better part of two days the snow fell steadily while we were at Kupup. Although it fell in small flakes it assumed a granulated form, like hailstones, on the ground. This was probably because it was being deposited by very high clouds. With all that snow about we were surprised to hear that the pass was open to travellers.



An Irishman in the Jungle



Liz Riding My Pony



Tibet—Amo-Chu above Yatung

*Drawing by the Author*

Unlike the Rohtang Pass, both the Natu-La and the Jelep-La (two passes which cross the mountains very near each other) are seldom closed to traffic for more than a day or two at a time throughout the year. During our three days at Kupup caravans of mules and yaks kept coming from or going towards the Jelep-La, some of them passing down the valley the way we had come, others moving up, making their way through to Kalimpong. The animals were laden with wool being taken through to India—even the sheep and the big Tibetan dogs were carrying loads of salt, which reminded us of the caravans in Lahoul.

But in these mountains the animals are not the only beasts of burden—men, women and children carry on their backs enormously heavy loads. Men, women and children who come from Tibet and from Sikkim and Bhutan. We had heard it said that the Bhutias are so lazy they would rather carry a double load (about two hundred pounds) than give themselves the trouble of making two journeys over the pass with single loads.

We met some of these Bhutias later on. They had just crossed a sixteen-thousand-foot pass, and men and women were carrying loads that weighed about two hundred pounds apiece.

In view of the difficulty that we had in carrying only the weight of our own bodies over the high passes, it was unbelievable that human beings could achieve what these Bhutias were doing. True, they were not in any hurry to complete their journey. They moved, in fact, only a few yards at a time before pausing to rest their appalling loads on the sticks they use for this purpose. They would rest a little then move forward again another few yards before the next rest. Time did not exist for them, and it did not matter how many days or weeks or months they spent upon a journey. But we were not surprised to hear that they are sometimes—in the Tibetan winter—frozen to death during the few minutes while they stand there resting their loads in the snow.

The tourists began their invasion of Kupup during our second day in that lonely place. The two couples we had met at Tsomgo turned up, but they did not stay. They were on their way through to Kalimpong, making for a rest-house seven or eight miles farther up the valley. From the windows of the little house at Kupup we watched them moving off, black specks fading to grey, then becoming lost to sight in the whirling whiteness of a blizzard.

The sky cleared next morning and we were able to make out the bridle track for most of its way, zig-zagging up to the pass. We guessed that the snow up there must be pretty deep, but

caravans were still coming through and, if only the snow held off, we hoped for a wonderful journey the next day, perhaps even a sight of Chumolhari far away on the plateau; we knew that from the top of the pass a wonderful world of mountains could be seen on a clear day.

When we awoke next morning snow was falling again—more thickly than before. It was real snow, too; not those thin, sleety flakes that had fallen as hailstones on the ground.

Before we began to move, every mule-load was already cushioned with snow. Yet in spite of the snow (or, maybe, because of it) we moved up towards the pass more easily than we had expected. The snow was drifting down so thickly that we felt urged to move on as fast as possible lest we should not be able to get through.

About half a mile below the pass we met the first mules of a caravan coming through from Lhasa—three weeks' journey away. By that time the bridle track was almost obliterated by snow; only a trace of it was discernible, barely wide enough for a man to place his feet, let alone heavily laden animals.

Not having any idea as to how long this caravan might be, we had to give it right of way—ourselves, our servants, our porters and our mules having to get off the track and stand up to our knees, and deeper, in snow until the caravan had passed. Moving about from time to time to avoid sinking deeper into the snow, we waited in a drifting silence broken only by the cries of drovers, and the plunging feet of animals seeking footholds in a track that was fast disappearing under the steadily falling snow.

It became impossible to see more than a yard or two ahead, and as we waited there hoping and praying for the last caravan to pass we would see yet another stumbling animal looming out of the blinding fog of snow.

I do not know how many animals passed through while we waited. My feet had become numb, unable to feel the cold at all, by the time that I began to try to count the animals; I have forgotten how many I counted (more than fifty, anyway), and already hundreds of them, it seemed, had passed us, tripping and stumbling down towards Kupup. There appeared to be far more than in any single caravan that we had seen before.

Although no sun could penetrate the whirling clouds of snow the light off it was blinding, and we were thankful for dark glasses. We saw that Potato and Terry had tied to their foreheads fringes of hairy lichen to protect their eyes from the unendurable glare—a poor protection, as we saw later when the men began



to suffer badly from ophthalmia. Meanwhile, with the pass barely two hundred feet above us, and Kupup nearly two thousand feet below; with nothing, not even the contours of the nearest hills, visible, nothing but mules appearing like phantoms out of the blinding snow—we were beginning to feel more and more apprehensive. If we did not get up to the pass soon it might become impassable, and if we could not go forward we might not be able to go back. In snow like this it would be too easy to miss our way altogether. We had no tents or protection of any kind, except a couple of crazy umbrellas that were falling to pieces under the weight of snow.

The porters, who were used to this kind of thing, kept assuring us that we would get through, but, even if we did, there were still something like fifteen miles to be covered before we could get to Yatung in the Chumbi Valley—Yatung where we were to be the guests of the trade agent, a Sikkimese gentleman we had never met, and who, for all we knew, might be sending search parties for us long before the day was over.

Nevertheless, after a delay of nearly two hours we saw the last mule emerge from the drifting pall of snow. We heard it slipping and plunging past us as we levered ourselves out of snow pits and worked our way up over the last few yards to the pass, which was marked by prayer-flags that looked utterly forlorn in the desolation of the snow.

We moved past the prayer-flags and stood for a while looking down towards the farther side of the pass—down into Tibet.

## *Peace in the Valley*

OUR first sight of the 'forbidden country' revealed one of the most forbidding scenes we had ever looked upon.

We found ourselves looking down into a cauldron of seething cloud and storm—snow whirling and drifting, grey mists rising like stream from unfathomable depths of darkness.

The bridle track (visible for only a yard or so before us) disappeared suddenly as if it had stopped at the brink of a precipice, inducing a horrible feeling that if we followed it we were in danger of stepping over the edge, finding ourselves falling into the abysmal murk which was all we could see of Tibet.

A few steps down, however, showed us the path winding downwards steeply amongst rocks and melting snow. Almost as soon as we had crossed the pass the snow had turned to sleet, and was thawing rapidly, making the track a torrent of slippery, melting slush. Astonishingly soon we saw below us the tops of trees—spruce and fir—with their branches bowed under a weight of snow that made them look like Christmas cards.

Long before we reached the levels of the Chumbi Valley the sleet had turned to heavy rain that came drenching through the dark forests as we splashed downwards to where the bridle track went winding among the fields and flats beside the Amo River.

From the top of the pass we had had no means of guessing what sort of a valley we were going into. But now we were in Tibet. And (except for the Tibetans and the yaks) anything less like the popular idea of Tibet could hardly have been imagined.

In some ways the rain enhanced the loveliness of the Chumbi Valley. It was drifting in tenuous clouds across the tops of mountain walls which, lower down, were dark with heavy forests of

spruce and fir. In the valley, rhododendrons—scarlet, white and orange—made startling splashes of colour among rocks and ever-green where the Amo River came swinging in broad curves round the spurs of the mountains.

We passed through villages that reminded us of Rupa. The wooden houses had shingled roofs weighted down with large stones, chalet-like houses with overhanging eaves.

Long before we reached Yatung we were in a terrible condition. We were soaked through from head to foot; our clothes were torn and spattered with mud, our shoes were falling to pieces, our limbs were scratched and bleeding where we had blundered through undergrowth, collecting botanical treasures.

The road wound down close above the banks of the river, passing over a wooden suspension bridge, below which the river plunged and raced with a fury I never saw equalled by any Himalayan river.

The Amo Chu was not in flood; it was at its normal level in this valley. But the speed and the din of its great toppling waves were terrifying. The waters charged along, raving and roaring above the deep note of grumbling boulders being churned to sand and gravel. The wooden bridge shuddered under the impact of water striving against the piers. The strongest swimmer in the world would not have had a moment's chance in water like that. You felt that nothing, not even a fish, could withstand the thundering fury of those waves.

Beyond the bridge we entered the village of Yatung. Passing through the narrow streets between the wooden houses we went on beyond the village, onwards till we reached the lane that led us to the trade agent's house, the Yatung residence of Rai Sahib Sonam Tobden.

The Rai Sahib was not in when we arrived. We were made welcome by his servants who told us that he was down on the parade ground attending the celebrations of the end of the war in Europe. It was requested that we go down and join in the fun.

Under other conditions, the notion of celebrating our arrival in Tibet by joining in the local peace celebrations would have been irresistible. But we were in no state to face a gathering of people who were probably all wearing their best clothes. At that moment, too, our one idea was rest and food, a good fire, and hot baths to follow. All of which was provided on a sumptuous scale by the orders of our host.

A log fire was already blazing in our room, and without waiting to change our wet clothes (except for peeling off the remnants

of shoes and stockings) we sat on the floor in front of that glorious fire, drinking pints of tea while we examined our wounds.

Blood was pouring from a long scratch on my leg; my Gangtok leech-bites were itching maddeningly—and I discovered that two of my toes were frost-bitten as a result of our long wait in the snow. However, although we looked and felt thoroughly travel-worn, after seventeen miles in snow, slush and rain, our faces at least were free from the painfully ugly effects of cold wind and sunburn.

Nearly all the tourists we had met on their return journey from the 'rigours of Tibet' had been so fired by the pioneering spirit that they had scorned to protect their faces from the fierce, cutting winds and sun of the high passes. Many of them had grown beards to intensify the feeling of adventure—the feeling we had abandoned in Gangtok. They had not had time to grow proper beards, so—in addition to lips and faces that were cracked, swollen, discoloured and bleeding—they looked scrubbily unshaven, unnecessarily repulsive; as if suffering from an unspeakable disease.

Long ago, in Lahoul, we had learned the need to protect our skins from dry, gritty winds and the searing sunshine of those altitudes, and we never travelled without a supply of 'face-saver' in our pockets—usually a preparation of glycerine and honey that was easy to apply, and infallible as a protection. Some of those bearded travellers had allowed their faces to get into such a mess that the sores were going septic.

Nevertheless, when our host appeared at the door of our room we felt thoroughly defaced by the magnificence of his appearance.

The Rai Sahib was wearing a beautiful Tibetan robe of blue satin brocade, reaching to his ankles. His hair was worn in the Tibetan style—a long plait fastened over the top of his head. From his left ear there drooped the long pendant earring which must be worn by all those who held official rank in Tibet. The earring, of turquoise beads and a small pearl set in gold, fell to his shoulder, and a small turquoise stud adorned his right ear. He told us later that the small stud (which is worn by all Tibetans, whether rich or poor, high or low) was of greater value than the stones in the official earring. There was a rule, he told us, that the stones of the official badge must not be of real turquoise. But that long pendant earring was very lovely, and most becoming.

Throughout our stay in Yatung, Rai Sahib Sonam Tobden showed us the utmost courtesy, hospitality and friendship. We knew ourselves to be extremely lucky to be staying with him, not

only because the rest-house at that time was invaded by more than thirty tourists, but also (which mattered more) because from him we were able to learn so much about the country. Altogether we spent more than six weeks in that lovely valley at Yatung—staying for our first five days with the Rai Sahib before moving on to Phari, staying again for six weeks, in the rest-house, on our return journey.

While we were the guests of the Rai Sahib he provided English food for himself and us, but afterwards there were three occasions when he invited us to share a real Tibetan lunch with his family. We found Tibetan food delicious. It consisted of bowls of soup served with relays of spaghetti to which we added an assortment of exquisitely cooked delicacies—mushrooms, hard-boiled eggs, pork, chicken and vegetables. We ate with chopsticks, the technique of which we were just learning to master at the end of the third lunch.

But to return to the peace celebrations in Yatung. This event went on for two or three days, on the last of which the Rai Sahib gave a wonderful party to which everyone was bidden, including the thirty visitors who were crammed into the four-roomed rest-house. Most of those visitors, however, were leaving Yatung that day, so that, besides ourselves, there were only two Europeans at the lunch party.

Forty of us sat down to lunch that day. Both the dining-room and the glassed-in veranda were filled with guests. The guests' servants were likewise being royally entertained, since it is the custom in Tibet for upper class families always to go about accompanied by servants who are received with generous hospitality by those whose houses they visit.

Tidied up as best we could, we who were British looked shabbily drab seated amongst that throng of marvellously dressed and jewelled Tibetans. Men and women were wearing their long satin robes of gorgeous colours—gold, sapphire, and a lovely shade of midnight blue. Apart from our host, only a few of the men spoke English—and none of the ladies.

One of them, however, Mrs. Norbhu, spoke Hindustani, so we were able to talk with her, and through her with the other ladies.

Some weeks later, after our return from the plateau, we entertained Mrs. Norbhu and some of our Tibetan friends to a lunch at the rest-house—an occasion on which Mrs. Norbhu insisted on having me photographed wearing Tibetan dress. She brought with her a selection of her most beautiful robes to choose

from, and decked me with charm-boxes and jewellery. But that was many weeks later—long after the day when forty of us had sat down to lunch at the Rai Sahib's table.

That final Peace Party was an unforgettable occasion. The Rai Sahib was a superb host, ensuring the ease of every one of his forty guests. The Tibetan ladies showed me how to eat rhododendron blossoms—a thing I would never have thought of trying to do! They looked wonderfully gay and attractive, holding between their teeth the orange-coloured flowers of *Rhododendron cinnabarinum* while they sucked out the juice. It tasted rather like sorrel.

Lunch was followed by games out of doors, which included musical chairs, which was extremely popular. The game became almost a riot when my husband found himself sitting on Mrs. Norbhu's lap.

A football match completed the day, the Rai Sahib and the Tibetans kilting up their satin robes, and putting up a vigorous game.

How utterly, how fantastically different from anything that we had pictured in the days, long ago, when we had first seen ourselves as Marco Polos adventuring to Tibet!

Our crossing of the Jelep-La had been nearer to our earliest visions of Tibet—visionary journeys we had longed to make in the days when we first looked at the snowy wastes of the Se-La range above Assam.

But—that our first days in Tibet should coincide with victory celebrations in Yatung! That was something we never could have guessed. It was something, also, that we would not have missed for anything. There in Yatung we were able to see Tibet at its best and happiest. We ourselves were sharing the rejoicings of those people who, from the highest to the lowest, were gathered together to enjoy themselves freely, in perfect weather (the rain had stopped that day) in the surpassing beauty of the Chumbi Valley.

The usual impression of the visitor to Tibet, confirmed by those who know the country well, is of a cheery, happy people who are reasonably well fed (we never heard of an instance of under-nourishment) and miraculously contented in a life that is as harsh as the country where they live. They seemed to be a people free from fear or want, despite the feudal oppression under which they lived. Unquestioning faith in the power of the lamas, in the efficacy of charms and symbols, and, above all, in the doctrine of reincarnation relieves the people of the urge to worry

about life upon this earth. Theirs is a faith which, properly understood, should make for indestructible happiness.

Unfortunately, it is only dimly understood. The pitiless force of unrestricted power is seen too often, power that betrays the harshness of the harshest country in the world. The Amo River, hurling its waters down below Yatung, typified that harshness and cruelty of unrestricted power. Yet the river held a deadly sort of fascination. Its appalling waves, thick with the mud of pulverized rocks, the swirling troughs, creamed with foam, the speed, the power, the madness of the water, cast a spell upon you, forcing you to stay watching it till you felt giddy; as though being drawn into the reeling rush of waters.

The Rai Sahib told us that three years previously two glaciers had fallen into the lake that feeds one of the branches of the Amo Chu. Yatung's only warning of disaster was a rumbling roar like thunder echoing through the mountains. Some thought it was an earthquake, but no one had time to think much.

Within seconds a wall of grey water was sweeping towards them, racing down the valley, overriding the toppling waves of the Amo Chu—crashing, flooding, foaming—spreading over fields and meadows, carrying away men and cattle, sheep and dogs, everything that lay in its path, including almost the whole of that part of Yatung built upon the right bank of the river.

Only three houses escaped disaster. They stand today near where a rock inscription records the height of that appalling flood.

Meanwhile we had only a few days left to linger in Yatung before starting off again on our travels, on our journey up to the plateau, to that part of his country which, the Rai Sahib told us, was typical of the true Tibet.

During those few days I spent some time making a toy cottage for the Rai Sahib's little daughter. We had noticed this rosy-cheeked child (I think she was five or six years old) running about playing in the garden with a young servant girl. The two of them seemed to have a wonderful time together, I have seldom seen a more contentedly happy child. But I noticed that she did not appear to have any toys. In her funny little ankle-length gown she would be seen running amongst the trees, laughing and chasing her nursemaid, or peeping shyly at us from odd corners of the house.

I asked her father if the child had any toys. No, he told me. Toys could not be bought in Yatung. But the little girl, never having had any, was perfectly happy without them. All the same, I wanted to see what her reaction would be if I made one for her.

Ever since I used, as a child, to make them for myself I have found my cardboard cottages an unfailing success with children. They take a long time to make, and—after their first enthusiasm—most children play the cottages to pieces within about an hour. But by that time both they and I have had our fun out of the toy.

Having no cardboard in Yatung I took some of the stiff 'drying sheets' that botanists use for pressing their specimens. I had no paints, but I had Indian ink and coloured crayons. Altogether it took me about four hours to make my cottage. As far as possible I made it look like the Rai Sahib's house (which was the same house, incidentally, that had sheltered the Dalai Lama in 1910 when he was threatened with arrest by Chinese troops). I made windows and doors that opened and shut; I made the roof bright red, and I drew roses and creepers (unknown to science) that climbed up over the doors and windows. Then I showed it to the Rai Sahib.

His delight would have been reward enough for my work, but when his daughter was shown the cottage her reaction was amazing. Her round, rosy face was almost split in half by an ecstatic grin, and her black Mongolian eyes disappeared in creases of sheerest ecstasy. And then she put the cottage on her head.

Whether she thought the cottage was a hat, or whether she was perpetrating a joke I do not know, but for the rest of our days in her father's house she went about wearing the cottage on her head. And she never broke even a window.

She was still playing with the cottage when we returned to Yatung from Phari; she was playing with it on the day we left her country. For all I know she may still possess the cottage I made for her—exactly seven years ago.

Five days in Yatung, and then we moved on again, upwards towards the plateau of Tibet. We would be returning to Yatung later to spend six weeks in that lovely valley. The valley then seemed all the lovelier after the barren bleakness to which we were going.



## *The Mountain and the Plain*

FOR a while we had parted with Kirit Ram. He had gone back to botanize on the Jelep-La, hoping to find the pass no longer deep in snow. Only Terry and Potato came with us when we left Yatung and moved to Gautsa, twelve miles up the narrowing valley of the Amo Chu.

Twisting, winding, climbing through the gorge we found ourselves unexpectedly at the edge of a wide and level grassy plain, the plain called Lingmatang.

Curving gently between low grassy banks, the Amo Chu up here might have been some quiet fishing stream of southern England. It was unbelievable that this placid, peaty water could be the same river as the thundering, roaring torrent which we had followed up from Yatung.

At Lingmatang there was wonderful grazing for cattle, and it seemed as though all the yaks in Tibet had come to this place to feed. There must have been hundreds of the delightful creatures moving about in their funereal draperies contentedly cropping the rich grass. Here and there families of herdsmen were gathered near their yak-hair tents, guarded by fierce Tibetan dogs—such as we had seen in Lahoul.

After the peaceful levels of Lingmatang we had to climb a track that soon became heart-breaking because of the slabs and chunks of stones that gave it some sort of a claim to call itself a metalled road. All the way to Gautsa (and for some miles beyond) after Lingmatang we had to step and climb, trip and stumble, over rough cobbles and rougher paving stones. It was cruel work for pack animals, their feet slipping as they heaved themselves from slab to rock, from rock to cobbled way. For yaks it did not

matter. In any circumstances (except, as we remembered, in the heat of Rupa years ago) yaks are imperturbable, though capable of astounding agility at times. From our bedroom window at Yatung we had watched yaks frisking up the hillsides pursued by herdsman's boys, scrambling and shouting, often having to climb to perilous heights before they could shoo the truant yak back into the herd. We envied them their agility as we cursed and stumbled upwards over the exasperating stones to Gautsa.

Gautsa village lay among the rocks at the head of a narrow gorge almost encircled by tremendous, gloomy cliffs that rose like the walls of a fortress five or six hundred feet above the village which, even for a Tibetan village, was filthy beyond description. Its one street was ankle-deep in black ooze composed of mud and pig-wallow mixed with slushy snow.

There was something almost biblical about the austere grandeur of Gautsa. You could imagine Elijah being fed by ravens in such a place, or a minor prophet uttering curses among the rocks below the cliffs. If he had stubbed his toes and bruised his shins as often as I had on the journey, he would have had reason to curse. By the time we reached the rest-house we had exhausted most of our curses and were in a frame of mind that accorded well with the doom-like beauty of our surroundings. Yet it was not entirely doom-like. Austerity was lightened by threads of waterfalls that came drifting down from the top of the cliffs, wisps of spray that fell among rocks and stones, and into chattering streams that wandered off to join the crashing waters of the Amo Chu.

The contrast of dark cliffs and rainbow-flashing waterfalls appealed to us tremendously. Moroseness gave way to rapture, and we wished we might have stayed longer. My husband itched to get above the cliffs where botanical rarities remained inaccessible to the ordinary traveller. I longed for time enough to make drawings of the cliffs and waterfalls, and of the dark houses of the village huddled under the cliffs.

But the rest-house was needed by others for the following day, so we were able to stop only one night. We did not know it then, but those who were coming were our three soldier friends whom we had last seen at Karpanang.

We met them next day after we had climbed for about six miles up the road from Gautsa to Phari. They had been as far as Gyantse and had left Phari that morning.

We all sat down by the roadside to have elevenses, though it was nearly half past twelve. We decided that this was an occasion

worthy of another attack on the Front Line Cake. We caused the cake to be unloaded, and we cut into it liberally. It was the sort of cake that is supposed to 'keep for ever'. Obviously it was not going to be given a chance to keep much longer. But it did not matter. We were in Tibet now. Anyway, I had two more cakes packed away, one of them awaiting our return to Yatung.

We asked the soldiers how much farther we would have to go that day.

"Something like twelve miles," they told us, "and it will seem much more before you get there. You'll see Phari in the distance soon after you get up to the plateau. It looks quite near. And it never comes any nearer."

They confirmed our suspicion that milestones in Tibet were not reliable. According to the milestones, Phari should have been about thirteen miles from Gautsa. Apparently it was more like eighteen miles. And, as the soldiers had warned us, it seemed twice that distance before we got there. We asked them about the stages between Phari and Gyantse.

"They're all the same," they said, "only the distances are longer. Once you've passed the last sight of Chumolhari it never varies. And," they added, "the telegraph poles go all the way."

The three soldiers passed on, moving downwards towards Gautsa. They were the last of the tourists we were to meet upon that journey.

We waited a moment, watching them until they were out of sight, then we followed the telegraph poles that went onwards—all the way.

Somehow that touch about the telegraph poles had brought before our eyes the dreary sameness of the plateau. Those few words of the soldiers made it more vivid than any description we had read. There would be nothing up there to lighten the weariness of drab monotonous miles. Nothing except the telegraph poles making each mile seem longer than the last.

Like ourselves, the soldiers were among the few who had done the whole journey on foot. They had walked the whole way from Sikkim to Tibet, from Gangtok to Gyantse. We were doing the same. We, too, began to feel the exhaustion they had felt after passing the level of fourteen thousand feet before the final rise to the plateau.

But we had all of twelve miles yet to cover, and still the path kept climbing up and winding round endless spurs of hill.

The Amo Chu was far below us now; it was no more than a

chattering stream fed by rivulets that trickled out from shelving drifts of snow. Yet a few miles more and we were level with the shallower waters where the river came winding through marshy ground, the soggy shallow valleys that open on to the plain.

We crossed the river by a wooden bridge and moved upwards round the shoulder of a hill. There we found the great expanse of the plateau opening out before us. We also found the corpses of two ponies that had been killed by lightning the day before.

Although from now on the track lay across the dead level of the plain, for the next five or six miles we were moving extremely slowly, barely achieving as much as one mile an hour. I knew I had to force my feet forward to get them to move at all. If I had felt like a ten-year-old among the snows of Kupup I now felt like a nonagenarian dragging herself one foot after another towards the farther side of the grave.

It was no use pausing to rest; there was no shelter from the bitter wind that drove through you like a sword. Besides, we feared that if we rested we might not again find strength to pull ourselves up and go plodding onwards over the dreary plain.

Then we remembered our emergency bottle of brandy. With a bottle of aspirin and other restoratives it was in a Bhutia bag slung over my shoulder. By the side of a stream we sat down, slightly sheltered from the wind by overhanging banks. I produced the brandy and we poured a little into our drinking mugs.

Its effect was startling. It tasted overwhelmingly of violets. I remembered how carefully I had washed that bottle before we left Shillong. For convenience of packing I had put the brandy into a screw-top bottle that had once contained an Elizabeth Arden beauty preparation. I had washed it, rinsed it, sniffed it, and washed it again, until I was certain it smelt of nothing but pure water. But Miss Arden's violet scent was as obstinate as the stench that had polluted our thermos flasks at Khoksar in Lahoul. Less offensive, but ineradicable. Whether or no the scent increased the potency of the brandy I cannot say. I know that a thimbleful of the stuff revived us with astonishing rapidity.

We pulled ourselves up again and moved on. Onwards, it seemed, towards nothing whatsoever. For nowhere on the horizon was there any sign of Phari. Nothing but the bare brown plain with its humpy, sad-coloured hills crouched against the horizon under a low-hanging sky.

The bridle track here was built over a rough causeway across half-frozen marshes where yaks moved about grazing amongst tussocks of grassy moss that floated in the marsh.

At nearly fifteen thousand feet we were far above tree level, and there was nothing to relieve the sad monotone of purply brown colouring. Nothing but yaks and the telegraph poles that went on and on—onwards, it seemed, to infinity—while we forced our weary selves over flat, unending miles.

After an hour or so (we had lost count of time) we saw Phari in the distance, its fort and houses rising like a mirage that receded as we advanced. By that time I was too spent to feel interest in anything beyond the effort needed to push one foot in front of the other, to urge myself forward over the barren, earthy ground. I heard my husband's voice saying: "I suppose that's it." I thought he was referring to Phari, a place which had ceased to have any interest for me. A place we would never reach. I went on—looking at the ground, at the marsh, and at the yaks, not raising my eyes until I heard him say again:

"That must be it. Look!"

I looked up then. And I saw Chumolhari, the Venerable Goddess of Tibet.

Grey-white clouds were moving above the lower hills, drifting apart, shredding into mists. And out of the mists there rose the unbelievable vision of the solitary peak.

For a while we were able to watch it as we moved along, moving less slowly now that we had that revelation of loveliness drawing us towards it. The whole mountain had unveiled itself, revealing its perfection of design—black saw-edged rocks climbing upwards to angular shapes of ice-fall and snowfield, themselves rising again towards the rocks below the final gleaming cone. Too soon the clouds came down again, wreathing across the face of the mountain, twisting and moving downwards, leaving nothing to beckon us onwards. Nothing but an angry turmoil of rocks and mist and snow.

That vision of Chumolhari helped us over the rest of the long day's journey, made us even forget the miles behind us, when, as darkness fell, we dragged ourselves slowly into Phari.

As a rule visitors do not stay in Phari. It is a town which has to be passed through, not lingered in; one with the reputation of being bleaker, dirtier and nastier than any town in the world—a place whose name, appropriately, means Hog Hill. Everyone who passes through Phari emphasizes his dislike of the place, and a great many hardened travellers have passed that way. Every expedition that had gone to try to climb Mount Everest had passed through Phari, and—judging from comments—you would think that the ice-walls, the ice-bound troughs, the frightful hard-

ships and the dangers of Everest were preferable to the bleakness, the harshness and the gritty winds of Phari.

And yet we, who were no hardened mountaineers, chose to stay there rather than complete our programme by going on to Gyantse.

We made the decision reluctantly. It was more or less forced upon us because by the time we stumbled into Phari it was becoming obvious that I was in no shape to tackle the remaining stages—journeys whose distances varied from eighteen to twenty miles, with altitudes varying hardly at all. That is, for the whole of the way we would be tramping mile after featureless mile across a part of the plateau where the level never drops below fourteen thousand feet.

Slumped into chairs beside the big iron stove in the rest-house, we tried to make up our minds whether or no to go on next day. In Yatung we had been told that there was no need to go beyond Phari to see what was typical of 'true Tibet'. The three soldiers had told us that there was nothing worth going on for, after the last glimpse of Chumolhari—the famous view of the mountain reflected in the lake at Tuna. But we had already seen the 'view' of the mountain as we had always longed to see it—an isolated cone standing up on the edge of the plain. If we stayed at Phari we might again see that wonderful vision. In the rest-house we would be dwelling on the very skirts of the mountain; we had only to go outside the door to look straight up to the shining summit rising sheer above us; if it ever became visible again.

We need walk less than a mile to find ourselves in glens where streams came winding down from Chumolhari's snows. If we stayed there we should have time to explore the glens of the mountain, time to do so much that we could never do if we just went on walking, interminably walking over the monotonous miles of the plain. Eventually we decided to stay in Phari for the next eight days.

To do this it was necessary to get the permission of the Rai Sahib, a simple matter since Phari is connected with Yatung by telephone. In a country so remote in space and time the telegraph poles had seemed incongruous enough. The telephone would have seemed an even greater anachronism; but the fact that it had to be hitched on to the telegraph wires before it could be used made it sufficiently medieval.

While my husband was in the post office waiting for this operation to be performed a Tibetan gentleman came in and

greeted him by name. Evidently news of our arrival was already known throughout the streets of Phari.

"Sir," said the Tibetan, "you are a doctor. I have venereal disease. Please to cure."

Regretfully, my husband explained that, not being a doctor of medicine, he was unable to undertake this interesting work; but he gave the sufferer some M. and B. tablets which may have helped.

More incongruous than the telephone and the telegraph service must have been the bus service which once ran between Phari and Gyantse. The service consisted of a Ford car which was driven up to Gangtok and there taken to pieces before being carried in sections over the mountains. On the backs of mules it was carried over the passes and along the Chumbi Valley; and it was carried up through the dark Gautsa Gorge, over the rocky cobbled way, along the face of the higher hills and on to the plateau—where it was reassembled and driven over the causeway across the marshy ground and the flat, stony lands of the plain.

For a short while it gave useful service, running easily along the levels of the plateau between Phari and Gyantse.

But this innovation was something of which the monasteries could not approve. It was something which smelt of progress; something which made it too easy for strangers to penetrate the isolation of Tibet; something which might be detrimental to the power of the monasteries. It would not do for the people to become used to the presence of magic that was far beyond the magic of the lamas.

The car was sent back to India and the bus service came to an end.

Having secured Phari rest-house for ourselves for the next eight days, we went out to explore the dirtiest town in the world. It was no dirtier than Gautsa or Yatung, possibly not even as dirty as Kyelang, but still—pretty filthy. And most unpleasant because of the bitter, cutting wind that blows all day across the plateau; a wind that whips up grit and dirt that sting your face and eyes, causing throats to become sore and septic from inhalation of particles of dirt.

Phari's flat-roofed houses (reminding us vividly of Kyelang) clustered together below the walls of the fort which rises from a slight eminence so that its buildings dominate the plain.

The fort, like all the large buildings of Tibet, stands magnificent in the strength and the simplicity of its design. Its long straight lines of walls are graded in tiers that rise to the square

towers of the highest storeys—walls that are painted white, with touches of terra-cotta on the highest towers, walls that draw the eye upwards from the sordid filth of the village; upwards like Chumolhari's cone shining above the plain.

The fort was originally built for military purposes but it is now mainly used as a market, Phari being the chief trade market of south central Tibet. In the foetid darkness of the lower floors of the fort we watched the market business going on—all kinds of grains being sold—millet, barley and parched maize. The importance of the grain market may be judged when it is realized that in the bleakness of the Phari plain no crops can ever ripen. The gritty ground is planted with wheat which is grown only for the sake of the straw it provides, straw that is needed for the thousands of pack animals that halt under the walls of the fort on their way through Phari. All food grains needed by the people have to be imported from the Chumbi Valley, or from other parts of Tibet.

All day long those caravans of pack animals were moving across the plain, or resting awhile under the walls of the fort; caravans of mules, of ponies, of yaks. But mostly yaks. Hundreds and hundreds of them coming through from Lhasa, or returning from the markets of Sikkim and Bhutan.

The yaks never lost their fascination for us. Whether they were browsing on the plain, moving about among the tussocky grass of half-frozen marshes; whether they were working as pack animals; or whether they were being ridden—looking rather like deformed Shetland ponies—we were again impressed by the irresistible charm of these creatures that are so essentially typical of Tibet.

The leading yak of a caravan is usually the proud bearer of a scarlet plume of dyed yak-tail that dangles from its neck, and a flag fluttering from a little pole fastened to the animal's head. We soon came to appreciate the manifold uses of the yak.

We saw that it is much more than a beast of burden. It is also used as a riding animal. The black upholstery of its long, hairy coat supplies wool as well as material for tents. It is the main source of milk and meat, though it is not killed for its meat; Tibetans eat only the flesh of animals killed by accident, or by someone other than themselves. And in treeless regions, such as the Phari Plain, the dried droppings of the yak provide the main source of fuel.

During our eight days' sojourn in Phari we came to know all that we cared to know of the advantages, and otherwise, of yak-





Chumolhari and Phari Town

*Drawing by the Author*



Botanist and Wife

dung fuel. Our food was cooked on it; the big iron stove was fed with it; our board and our lodging tasted and smelt of those all-pervading fumes. It was an inescapable, unforgettable smell. The sort of charnel-house smell that recalled the smell of incinerators in refugees' camps. It was a smell that urged me to record in verse the wonders of the yak.

Bleak Phari, filthiest village of the plain!  
Oft, in our dreams, we turn to you again.  
Yet not to Phari's filth our thoughts turn back,  
But to that noble animal—the yak.

Oft have I seen the bare, brown plain of Phari  
Beneath the shifting veils of Chumolhari;  
A sad brown plain; with moving herds of yak  
Looking like sofas draped in deepest black.

Oh, noble yak! Fulfilling every need!  
A beast of burden now—and now, a steed.  
A steed for man to ride. And then—again  
A transport column moving o'er the plain.

You give us milk; and meat; and tents; and wool.  
Still more miraculous—you give us fuel!  
Words can't describe, nor pen of man recall  
The bounteous blessings that the yak lets fall.

Now—some there be that make the allegation  
That Phari's plain is bare of vegetation.  
Yet—yaks the scientific truths maintain—  
All flesh is grass. All fuel is yaks' domain.

Every day at Phari while blizzards drove across the plateau we sat waiting beside the stove, waiting until the fumes got too much for us and the fuel too sulky to give out any warmth, waiting until we could go out and explore the neighbourhood. Mercifully we were not entirely dependent on the iron stove and its yak-dung fuel. We had brought with us my little oil stove—the same one that had 'saved my life' when I was poisoned in Lahoul. We could not afford to burn the stove all day as our supplies of oil were limited and we reserved the oil for boiling milk and drinking water, both of which were undrinkable if boiled on the local fuel. At that height water boiled at 180 degrees Fahrenheit, which meant that our tea was never really hot and became cold

very soon. Therefore we preferred to drink cocoa, which seemed to retain its warmth much longer.

We managed to make porridge on the oil stove, and out in the cookhouse Potato contrived meals that were passably appetizing. Having bought a sheep in Yatung we lived on mutton and potatoes, and dried onions fried with the mutton.

Potato wasn't much good at puddings, but by now we had breached the second of the Front Line Cakes. A slice or two of that left no empty corners yawning for more food.

Food and fumes and smells and gritty wind, and bitter cold and blizzards. What inhuman conditions in which to choose to spend a holiday! Compared with the amenities of a Butlin camp we might as well (in the opinion of some) have walled ourselves up like the hermits of Tibet.

We had read about those hermits. While we were in Yatung we had talked with the Rai Sahib, asking him if what we had heard was ever proved—that they were able to survive for as much as fifty years bricked up in total darkness in their ghastly solitary cells. There were many authentic cases, we were told, and the Rai Sahib had pointed to the cliffs not far from his own house. Somewhere among those cliffs a hermit had his cell.

It was some years since the hermit of Yatung had taken the final vows before entering his cell, seeking to attain the highest merit through unbroken silence, through unending darkness, and through total isolation from the world. Till death should free the spirit from the body.

Food and drink for these holy men is left upon a ledge outside the cell. Sometimes the hermit's withered hand would be seen pushing aside the shutter that protected the small opening above the ledge. But no word would be spoken, no sign of life displayed—except the shrivelled, wasted hand.

Those lamas who decide to become hermits must first submit to periods of probation, starting from three months at a time, then three years and three months, finally retiring altogether, never again to look upon the world beyond the darkness of their cells.

A number of probationers find the first three months as much as they can bear. Those who survive the three-year test—in darkness and solitude throughout the arctic winter of Tibet—are known to have become definitely insane, or fanatical beyond the limits of reason. Quite often, too, their sight is gone, blindness darkening for ever eyes which for too long have been denied the faintest glimmer of light.

Whether there were any hermits near Phari I do not know. It was a likely sort of place, one might think, to drive a man to various forms of madness. It was easy to imagine the effect that Phari could have on many people—even ourselves—obliged to stay there for any length of time. The queer, sad colouring of the plain, a sort of twilight brown that turned to murky purple on the evening hills; the gritty, searing wind that blew all day; the burnt-flesh smell of yak-dung fires; the harsh, staccato noise of Phari's life—these things combined to produce an effect of bitter melancholy. The sort of melancholy that might too easily affect one's mind.

Yet for the eight days we were there we managed to preserve our sanity—unless it was a form of madness that induced us to stay so long. A form of madness that made us, for a while, quite fond of Phari. For, despite the bitter cold and the inadequate heat of the stove, we were enjoying ourselves—for those few days.

We had been told that the people of Phari were surly, suspicious and disobliging. But they seemed to us to be cheery enough in their way. Wonderfully cheery when you considered the awful gritty harshness of their country. A gritty harshness that was expressed in the very voice of Phari. All day long we heard that voice in the sound of cart-wheels bumping over stony ground, in the grunting shouts of men in charge of the carts, in the raucous braying of trumpets in the fort, and the still more raucous cough of a bugle badly played. It was a voice that was tuneless and colourless like the hoarse croak of the ravens strutting on the walls of the fort—strutting and pecking at slabs of yak-dung drying on the walls. Then there were the jingling notes of pony bells, and the shouts of women washing garments in the stream that provided Phari's drinking water. It was a shock to find the women washing clothes—not because of the pollution of the water (which must have been rich as soup by the time it reached the foul alleys of the town), but because we had made the mistake of thinking that clothes were never washed in Tibet. But, of course, this was Phari's summer. No matter how bleak and cold we might find the climate, it was possible that at this time of the year even a Tibetan might feel glad of a refreshing wash. The women and the children certainly seemed to be enjoying themselves as they splashed and banged dingy looking garments among the stones and pebbles of the stream. It was one of the streams that came down between the long spurs of Chumolhari.

We followed that stream for some distance up its glen, finding tiny primulas and gentians growing among spongy moss and

grassy banks that shone green as emeralds below the parched turf of desiccated slopes. On islets in the pools, close to the mountain track, we found Brahminy ducks nesting. They were totally unconcerned by the nearness of people passing by.

It was extraordinary to be able to approach so near to these birds which, in India, are so shy that it is never possible to come within even shooting-range of them. But in Tibet the birds are remarkably tame because shooting or any kind of killing of wild creatures is forbidden; the whole country is a sanctuary for wild life.

We had been in Phari for about six days when Kirit Ram rejoined us. He came with a tale of assault and robbery on the top of the Jelep-La.

Like most of his tribe, Kirit Ram was not a big man, nor was he young. But he was wiry and brave, tireless and undaunted by the mountains. He was also a first-rate field botanist. Returning to the Jelep-La, he had found the alpine flowers already pushing up from under the melting snow. He had wandered about among the soggy wastes intent upon the collection of as many species as he could find. And then a large Tibetan bandit came up and clouted him over the head.

Wiriness and agility, and Garwahli indignation, were no match for the burly strength of the bandit. Kirit Ram's pocket-book, containing all the money he possessed at the time, was taken from him. I think that even his imperturbability was ruffled by the assault. But he finished the job that he had gone to do. He made a magnificent collection which he brought with him to Phari. His financial loss was made up to him, and his status as a hero did him a deal of good.

The tale of Kirit Ram's adventure roused us from a kind of flatness that had settled on us in Phari. We were still enjoying ourselves in a way, but more and more we were aware of an oppressive staleness. Despite the strong human smell of the town, Phari was an inhuman place. Humanity at Phari was something apart from the usual conception of the word. There was nothing artificial about it; it was all a part of the bleakness, the remoteness, of the highest plateau in the world. It was the kind of humanity to appeal to writers who like their subject-matter to be strong and high.

If only we had been able to speak Tibetan, to go amongst the people and to talk with them, we would have found the 'human touch' that seemed lacking in the detached view we had of the place. There was no doubt that the human touch was there, all

right. You did not need to dig below the dirt to find it; you could smell it a mile away. Yet insistently—and oddly, seeing that we were living at such an altitude—we could not rid ourselves of that feeling of flatness that makes it difficult to bring any life into the memory of the days we spent there. Undoubtedly the height affected us, but it seems absurd to blame it for making us feel so flat.

In a final effort to shake off that feeling we decided to move higher, somewhere on the slopes of Chumolhari.

On railway stations in North Wales you are faced by an abrupt notice—‘Ascend Snowdon’. The injunction seems to be irresistible, and often fatal. No such commands are issued to the traveller in Phari. I know of only one man (Mr. Spencer Chapman) who obeyed the impulse to ‘ascend Chumolhari’—and he was an experienced climber who nearly lost his life in the attempt.

We did not aspire to follow his example. All we hoped to do was to walk as far as was walkable towards some height that would bring us nearer to the central mountain mass. And so it happened that our last day in Phari saw us moving northwards over the plain, skirting the outflung spurs of the mountain, gradually moving in under the long slopes of a gentle spur that took us slowly upwards.

I suppose we had climbed another thousand feet above the plain when something moved against the parchment-coloured slopes above us. It was little more than a shimmering movement, as though the wind had stirred among the dry grass.

And then the movement resolved itself into the shapes of five Tibetan gazelle, the same pale straw colour as the grass. We stood awhile, motionless, hardly able to believe that those exquisite animals were real. They looked so shadowy and dreamlike, as though the shape of rock and hill were visible through the transparency of their colouring.

Suddenly they got wind of us. They galloped noiselessly away, their lovely forms vanishing like wraiths, lost to us in an infinity of yellowed grass. Had there been nothing else to see at Phari it was worth everything to have seen those pale, ghost-like gazelle.

Somehow or other we pushed ourselves up another thousand feet (it may have been more) before we felt close enough to the rocks and ice of Chumolhari.

At an altitude of nearly seventeen thousand feet we found a gentle hollow where grass was pushing up amongst the snow. Here we rested and watched the clouds drifting, rising and falling across the great mass of the mountain.

One end of our sheltered hollow was blocked by the remains of an ancient terminal moraine that had been pushed up by the snout of a glacier long ago retreated to the world of ice and snow that towered above. Drifts of snow lay in patches among the boulders where we rested. A spring came gurgling out of the marshy ground, its tinkling waters alone disturbing the magic silence of that lonely place.

The jagged rocks of the mountain were very near to us. We could see tremendous cliffs falling to a ravine whose depth was hidden by a triangle of snow-capped rock. The mists came down and floated up, drifting apart and drawing together, for ever revealing different facets of the mountain.

Sometimes we fancied we saw the ultimate cone shining unearthly white above the floating mists, then veiling itself to prove us wrong, drawing our eyes upwards towards the gleam of ice-cliffs falling from dazzling fields of snow.

In such a place no human touch was needed. Yet life was there. We had heard it in the weird call of Himalayan marmots, seen it in the bright eyes of shy little creatures popping out from their holes among the rocks, seen it in the movement of gazelle. But the 'human touch', the strong humanity of Phari, would have been desecration. Yet to that strong humanity we must return. From that enthralling vision and that unearthly silence we came away, down to the gritty soil and the stinging winds of Phari's plain, back to the spasmodic noises of Phari's town, and to the warmth of the iron stove which, for a brief time, we caused to blaze while it consumed the packing cases I had kept to cheer us on our last evening.

Next morning we left Phari—in a blizzard.

Stumbling blindly across the plain, heads down to meet the driving sleet, we soon lost sight of Phari. We moved across a world that had no horizon, a land where nothing was visible, either of the mountain or the plain. Nothing except pack animals and yaks, shadowy forms that vanished into the smoking drift of the blizzard.



## *Blessings for the Hills*

**D**OWNWARDS from Phari's smoking sleet, downwards over the heart-break stones to Gautsa, and down from Gautsa's rocky glen to the peaceful glades and the yaks at Lingmatang.

And onwards then to Yatung where we spent six of the most perfect weeks I can ever remember. Six weeks that ended in the last of our journeys among the Himalayas.

From Gangtok in the early morning we saw again Kanchenjunga lifted head and shoulders high above the range of giant peaks that shone dazzling white above the valleys. Then downwards into those valleys, into the muggy heat of the Teesta Gorge, and out across the plains steaming in airless heat under a monsoon sky.

Completely hidden now, the mountains had withdrawn behind massed clouds that hung like a heavy curtain drawn across the foothills.

As we drove across the plains between the gleaming rice fields, and through the drooping heat of villages and towns, the world of mountains seemed lost to us for ever. But they were hidden only for a while. We knew that although we might never travel again amongst the forests and the mountains we should see the hills when the clouds receded after months of rain.

We saw them again, for the last time, across the Assam Valley, the whole of the Se-La range hanging like a mirage above the foothills, bathed in evening light. The three great peaks of the centre range were flushed with the glow of a pearl. East and west across the horizon stretched the long, serrated range of snows, no more than a crinkled line of white above the greying lower hills. A line which, far to the west, rose to a tiny knob—

the cone of Chumolhari, very, very far away. And Kanchenjunga small as a finger pointing to the sky.

From the dark line of the forests the foothills rose in smoky blue that deepened, spreading upwards, darkening the hills. We watched while the pearl light faded from the snows, leaving them coldly white, then grey and desperately cold, visible for just one moment more before the darkening foothills met the deepening night.

Night had dropped the curtain over the forests and the hills that we had known. Far across the valley and deep behind the forests lay the countries of those people whose lives had remained untouched throughout the war. Primitive they might be, ignorant (or innocent) of the 'blessings of civilization', but the more ignorant they were the greater seemed to be their freedom from oppression and fear.

Perhaps the greatest fear they knew was fear of the unknown, and fear of evil spirits, most of whom could be propitiated or appeased.

Fear of the known and of the inevitable is something they have yet to learn. Something they will soon learn, perhaps, through the blessings of civilization and education.

Already there exists a plan to bring those blessings to the people of the hills. A letter from our old friend, Rai Sahib Dwarikanath Das, tells us of the latest changes on the Balipara Frontier Tract. The hills are being 'opened up', and roads are being built in order that education may be carried to the people. A jeep road is being taken up as far as Pestiferous Camp. Does this mean petrol pumps and tobacco kiosks, tea-shops and bazaars springing up among the oak trees and the ferns and the insects? Extremely likely. We saw it happen among the forests and mountains during the war. Not entirely to the benefit of the people of the hills.

Out of the evening dusk that blurs the vision of those hills, pictures form and reform of the people we knew—Daflas, Akas and Mombas, kings and queens and Khoas, processions, feasts and festivals, and tribal feuds. And everything we had no chance to learn because our time there was too short.

Others may have that chance, and it would be good to know that they will take it. It would be good to hear that education for the tribes may include the will to sift and preserve what is best among the traditions of the people.

So much remains unknown and unrecorded of these tribes; their unwritten languages, their customs and their history, their folk-lore—almost everything omitted from this story of our own

life among them. Already many of our old friends have gone. Dwarikanath tells us that most of the Daflas whom we knew best have died. And old King Wangya died not long ago. "With him," says Dwarikanath, "the old order has vanished for ever." For good or ill we cannot say. All depends on what type of new order is likely to take its place. With their old leaders gone, and the hills 'opened up' to admit the blessings of progress and education, will the peoples keep their identity? Or will they become merged with the people of the plains, too quickly learning to forget and to feel ashamed of their jungle origin?

It is easy, for some of us, to become sentimental about the 'noble savage'. But we who knew them as they were fear for what they may become, and for all that might be lost in the story of these tribes. Lost unless studied and recorded before it is too late.

And beyond the foothills, beyond the countries of the unknown tribes, behind the outer barrier of the highest mountains in the world—what blessings await the people of the distant valley of Lahoul? And of the plateau of Tibet? The people who have already risen to a higher level of civilization, so much higher (but is it better?) than anything known among the tribes of the Assam hills? The future of those people loops itself into a question mark that stands high among the questions of today.

Almost as high as the summit of the mountains. And the answer is just that much beyond our guess, and just as perilous. Any answer to the question is likely to be out of date before the words are spoken.

Even while we were there, mere tourists in the land, we guessed that Tibet could not much longer maintain her isolation. Already Tibet is being offered a freedom that seems likely to be forced upon her.

The kind of freedom that was implied by the recent arrest at Chamdo of Mr. Robert Ford, a young wireless operator who had been working in Lhasa. I have reason to believe that we met Mr. Ford while we were living in Yatung. We both remember an extremely nice young man who stayed one night there on his journey through to Lhasa, where he was going to be in charge of the wireless station. We stayed at the Yatung rest-house together, and we shared with him the last of our Front Line Cakes.

The next day he moved on, taking the road to Phari and beyond Phari right across the long stages to Lhasa.

Five years later we read of his arrest at Chamdo. He had been accused of having poisoned a lama credited with Communist

sympathies. The accusation is as fantastic as if Mr. Ford had accused us of poisoning him with a slice of our Front Line Cake. The sort of accusation that was typical of justice in the Middle Ages.

But now Tibet is to be set free from the tyranny of the Middle Ages. She is to be given the blessings of a civilization that knows by instinct the sort of person likely to poison a lama. A civilization that reaches higher than the highest mountains in the world. A civilization that reaches up—if not quite to the stars—at least as far as the dense cumulus of the newest kind of bomb.

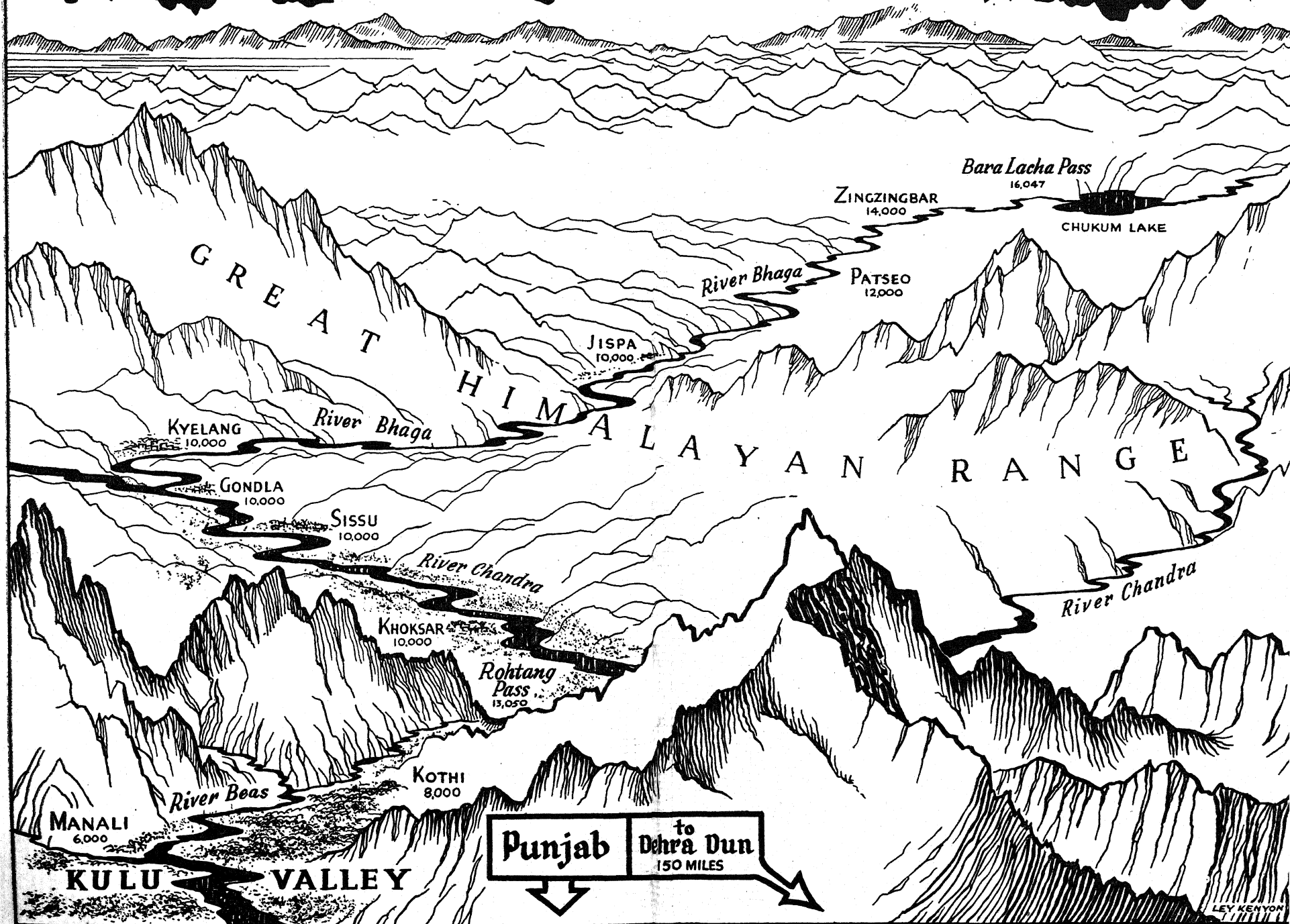
The highest plateau in the world is no longer safe from the rising tides of progress, tides that may yet submerge the people of Tibet, as if their land lay once again beneath the ocean rocks from which the mountains rose.

THE END



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